

The Dating App

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The Dating App

by [tellthemstories](#)

Summary

“Are you sure you're okay with it? Like, really okay? George dating?”

“Yeah,” says Dream. “Why wouldn't I be?”

Sapnap just looks at him.

—

George has never been on a date before. Dream helps him set up a dating app profile and score a few dates. As far as Dream's concerned, he's the perfect person to find George the right guy, he doesn't know why everyone else is being so weird about it.

Notes

originally posted on anonymous because I still can't quite admit that I've fallen into the mcyt rabbit hole.

This is set in a vague place that is neither America nor Europe, just know they're all at university together and some of them work at the coffee shop too. Don't think about it too hard. We're using mostly real names here, with a few exceptions.

Fair warning: George will date other people. They're not smp members. It's seen through dream's eyes and is a plot point. We all know dnf is going to be end game.

Huge thanks to [Treis](#) for being my new dream smp bestie, offering to beta read and writing the manhunt fic that made me inspired enough to finally write some mcyt fic of my own

(go read [it](#), it's amazing).

don't repost, send to ccs, respect boundaries etc etc.

Chapter 1

“Your boyfriend’s here.”

“*What?*” Dream looks up sharply from the coffee he's making, nearly spilling it all over his hand. The door to the coffee shop is open, a familiar brunette figure just stepping inside and unwinding the scarf from around his neck.

“Fuck off,” Dream shoots back at Sapnap, who just grins at him, and goes back to making the coffee.

When he next glances over, George has situated himself at the corner booth he always, somehow, inexplicably, manages to get whenever he's in the coffee shop. Dream doesn't know how he does it; it can be the busiest point of the day, a queue out of the door and tables packed with people — then George walks in and miraculously there's his booth free.

Dream gets to work on his coffee order.

When George makes his way to the counter, Dream’s just finishing off the stylistic love heart he’s made in the foam. He grins as he puts the mug down and pushes it across the counter to George. “Just for you, babe.”

“Oh my God, *Dream!*” George hisses. The three girls behind him in the line look curiously in his direction. They spot the heart immediately; their tittering laughter mixes with Dream's wheezes.

George glares at him as he gets his phone out to pay.

Dream waves him off. “On the house.”

George pauses, phone held over the card machine. “Really?”

“Yeah. My treat.” Dream had seen on twitter earlier that day that George was having a rough day, something to do with an early-morning lecture and a string of broken code that just wouldn’t fix itself.

A slow smile dawns on George’s face. “Thanks.” He puts his phone away and curls his hands around the mug.

Dream bites back the urge to say ‘any time’ which, whilst it’s true (he loves treating his friends whenever he can) will only give more fuel to Sapnap who, having just finished an order for another customer, immediately zones in on them.

“Dream,” he whines. “Why do you never give *me* free drinks?”

“You *work here*. You can make *yourself* free drinks.”

“But it’s not the *same*.”

Sapnap reaches for George’s drink, attempting to steal it. George immediately pulls the mug in close to his body, somehow managing not to spill it all over himself, though the heart goes a little wobbly. Then, very purposefully, with a grin intended to irritate, takes a long drink.

“Mmm,” he says. “Free coffee. It’s good.”

Sapnap scowls. “Bet it’s not as good as *your mom’s*—”

“Oh my god,” says Dream, somehow resisting the urge to throw his arms up in frustration as Sapnap and George immediately get into it, trading insults back and forth. Why are they *like this*.

He leaves them to it as he serves the three girls behind George, making easy conversation with them despite his friends bickering right behind him.

Eventually, George and Sapnap get bored, and George makes his way back over to his booth with his coffee.

“Oh, you’re going to do some actual work now?” Dream asks as Sapnap, as he returns to the coffee machine. “Got over your little jealous tantrum?”

“Shut up.”

“Do you feel unloved?” Dream asks, “Do you want more attention, is that it?” He throws his arm around Sapnap, attempting to pull him in close and nuzzle into the side of his neck as Sapnap wrestles with him. Dream murmurs every stupid epithet he can think of into his skin, confident in Sapnap being so short he can’t throw him off.

“Dream!” Sapnap moans, close to kicking the floor in frustration. “Stoop!”

Dream relents, laughing, and lets Sapnap shove him away. Sapnap grumbles to himself and attempts to straighten out his shirt, glancing over in George’s direction. Dream follows his gaze and spots Karl and Alex, who must have come in when he wasn’t looking. The two of them are sitting with George, laughing and joking about something. Karl’s hair is getting long, he keeps having to brush it out of his eyes. Alex is still stubbornly wearing his beanie, refusing to take it off even indoors. Sapnap’s looking straight at Karl.

Dream rolls his eyes and checks Sapnap with his shoulder. Sapnap startles, then checks him back, acting like he’s not flustered at all, and they get back to work.

Occasionally throughout his shift, Dream looks over in the direction of his friends when he hears various explosions of laughter. George catches his eyes a few times, grinning back at him. It’s nice.

“Here, Dream!” Karl’s voice calls from across the coffee shop, some time later. “What do you think?”

Dream flips the cloth he was using to wipe down the counter onto his shoulder and makes his way over. George is slumped down fully in his seat, hands covering his face. When Dream arrives, he makes some sort of strangled noise in the back of his throat, muffled behind them like he’s trying not to scream.

“Here,” says Karl, shoving George’s phone in his face.

Dream drags his gaze away from George to look down at the phone screen. It takes a minute for him to figure out what he’s seeing.

It’s a dating profile. For George.

“Would you date George?” asks Karl.

“*What,*” says Dream. He looks from the phone screen back to George, who is still hiding behind his hands, apparently making a concerted effort not to believe in object permanence. Dream clears his throat, awkward. “Uh, well—”

Karl rolls his eyes. “You're allowed to say the homies are hot, Dream.”

Dream dodges. “What's this even for?”

Alex rolls his eyes and reaches out to snatch the phone from Karl. “It's a dating app, idiot. You know, for us mere mortals who don't have girls leaving their phone numbers on the back of receipts for us *every day*—”

“That was *one* time!”

“Okay, on receipts *and* take-out coffee cups,” Alex snipes back, which, well, Dream can't really argue with that. It *has* happened more than once.

“And we're doing it for George because he's never been on one before,” Karl adds, throwing an arm around George's shoulders to pull him in close. The tips of George's ears are turning pink.

Dream blinks.

“Man's never been on a date before,” Alex announces loudly, letting Dream, the table behind them, and just about everyone in the coffee shop know. “What a *loser*.”

Dream turns to George, surprised. “Really?”

Slowly, George's fingers separate so he can peer through them at Dream. His cheeks are pink now too. He doesn't say anything, but the look in his eyes alone is enough.

“Huh,” says Dream.

“I mean, I've kissed people,” George says defensively, lowering his hands, “And fooled around at parties and whatever. They've just...”

“Never been worth more?”

“No!” George says, as Alex snorts and Karl laughs, both immediately jumping on the *hit it and quit it* jokes. “Shut up,” he hisses at them, “That's not—”

“It's fine,” Dream attempts to reassure him, barely holding back his own laughter as he holds his hands up, placating. “You can say you're a heartbreaker who only does one night stands, George.”

“—just not the one,” George finishes, voice pitching quiet.

Dream turns his head sharply, but George is looking down at the table, not at him.

“Anyway,” says Karl, “We figured we'd help a bro out. Hence, the dating profile.”

“It's not that easy though,” Alex says, “What can we even put for George to get people to date him? Doesn't like going out in the sun, hasn't cut his hair in forever, acts like a giant man-child...”

Dream scoffs. “George is smart.”

Alex snorts. "Yeah *right*. Smart as in, good at getting people to do things for him." He ignores the outraged 'hey!' from George. "Oh! How do you spell privilege? We should put that in, like yeah, he's *pretty* but—"

"George is handsome, yeah," says Dream, "But he's also *clever*." Being good-looking is just one tiny part of what makes George, *George*.

Dream can *feel* himself starting to grow annoyed.

George groans and puts his head in his hands again. Dream ignores his muffled '*Dream, stop*' as he continues, "And he's funny, and a great friend and, and—"

Alex is merciless: "Whiny and annoying and—"

"Shut *up*," Dream says. "That's not—" he lets out a frustrated noise. "Fuck it, *fine*. Fine. Give it here." He takes the phone from Alex's laughing grip as Karl says something suggestive on his other side. Dream ignores him, unlocking George's phone and bringing up the dating app. "You're both idiots."

He goes to work furiously, deleting everything they've done so far and starting again from scratch.

He nudges George in the side with his elbow to get him to shift up and make room for him in the booth, then Dream slides in to sit next to him, attention focused on George's phone.

The photos are the most important part, he thinks, as he opens up George's Instagram and begins scrolling. He's got to look good, attractive enough to get people's attention but not so good that they think he's a catfish. Dream glances up from the phone at George - who has rallied to bicker with Alex about something dumb - and thinks, *not hard*. George has always been pretty, so there's lots of photos to choose from.

The problem is: George likes to take the worst selfies of himself. His photos of other people? Fine. Photos other people take of him? Great. Photos of himself? Taken at the most awkward angles in the most awful lightening, half the time not even showing his full face. Almost like George doesn't want to take it too seriously because that would mean he cares about something.

With a sigh, Dream takes out his own phone and begins scrolling through the photos he has of George.

Creating a good profile takes time: he loses himself in finding the right photos and then the right words to go along with it. He speaks only once to say, "Guys, yeah?" to George when setting the access for who can message him.

"*Hell* yeah," says Karl, reaching over to fistbump him.

Dream glances to George for confirmation. George nods, once, then goes back to his conversation with Alex. Dream always figured he was, but it's good to get confirmation. He's still working out where he himself lies, probably closer to bi on the spectrum, but most of the time it's just about personality, who he clicks with the most.

Dream goes back to making the profile.

"Here," he says finally, resurfacing from his hyper focus. He checks the time on the screen, realises 20 whole minutes have passed.

Karl blinks, interrupted mid-sentence, and then his gaze drops to the phone Dream is holding up.

“Oh,” he says, grin dawning, and reaches for it.

George gets to it first, his hand darting out and grabbing his phone from Dream’s grip. There’s silence from the table as he reads the bio Dream created for him and swipes through the photos.

Dream realises he’s tapping the fingers of his left hand against his thigh, a sign he’s nervous, which is ridiculous. He crosses his arms over his chest instead, leaning back against the faux-leather seat.

Karl leans over, hooking his chin on George’s shoulder as he looks down at his phone screen.

“Hey, you look hot in that one,” he says, pointing at the screen. “You’ve been holding out on us!”

“These photos aren’t mine,” George says.

Karl gasps. “Where’d you find these pics, Dream? Wait, George, do you have a private Insta you haven’t told me about? I am *wounded*.” George shakes his head no. Karl gasps again, louder.

“*Dream*. Do you have a secret George folder on your phone?”

“No.” It’s not secret. He just hasn’t mentioned it to anyone.

“Ahh, this one’s cute,” Karl says, pointing at the screen again. “Is that your cat?”

“Yeah,” Dream and George answer at the same time. George’s gaze flicks up to his.

“I’m not sure about the bio, though,” Karl continues, “You make George sound pretty appealing here, what’s up with that?”

George elbows him in the side and Karl laughs. Alex demands to see and so Karl takes the phone from George, passing it over to him. Their heads bow together as they scroll through the profile together, talking in low voices to each other.

“Thanks,” says George, quiet. He’s looking Dream straight in the eye.

“No problem,” says Dream. Then, on impulse, without thinking: “You know I’d do anything for you.”

George rolls his eyes and scoffs, but his smile is genuine.

“Dude!” says Karl. “You might *actually* get some dates with this!”

“Yeah, *George*,” says Alex. “You might go on dates.” For some weird reason, he’s looking at Dream as he says this, eyebrows raised and grin huge. Dream’s eyebrows pinch together in a frown.

“I knew we could rely on Dream,” Karl says. “Didn’t I say it?” He puffs out his chest. “I’m the greatest homie ever. Admit it: I was right. Karl Jacobs: genius.”

“You didn’t even make the profile!” Alex points out, “Dream did!”

“—I’ll take free coffees for the rest of the month as payment. No, George, you don’t need to give me your first born, it’s fine—”

Alex starts to argue with him about whose idea the dating app profile was in the first place. As they bicker, George catches Dream’s eye. *Thanks*, he mouths to him.

No problem, Dream replies. He smiles.

Checking the time again on his watch, he swears under his breath and then gets to his feet. From walking over to their table to making the profile, he's lost a full half hour of his shift. Oops. Good thing it's a quiet day.

He heads back over to the counter where Sapnap is finishing off some sort of elaborate coffee order for two teenage girls who look up at Dream with wide eyes as he passes by.

“What were you up to?” Sapnap asks.

“Making George a dating app profile.”

“...What?”

Before Dream can reply, a customer appears, and then there's a sudden influx, the first of the late afternoon crowd, and so he gets to work.

Alex and Karl hang around for another hour before heading out to a lecture. As they leave, Karl makes sure to yell, “Goodbye, my beloved!” back to Sapnap and Alex makes kissing faces at him. George catches Dream's eye across the coffee shop and pulls a face. Dream grins.

The rest of Dream's shift passes in relative normalcy. There's the early-evening rush when most lectures are finished, a variety of different students coming in looking for a quick caffeine fix after a day of study. Niki comes in during a lull and he takes a couple of minutes to chat with her, appreciating her warm positivity.

George got out his textbooks after Alex and Karl left, stays studying at his table in the corner by the window, backlit by the fading sun as evening falls. He has one hand in his hair, elbow resting on the table as he writes notes in his writing pad with the other. He should look like any other student, bored and stressed in equal measures, dressed unspectacularly in his oversized sweater and jeans, but as the sun goes down, golden rays cast George in a stupidly-good light, highlighting the edge of his cheekbone, the line of his jaw. He's caught the eye of more than one person at the coffee shop, other students who stare openly or send furtive looks in his direction, whispering behind their hands to their friends.

He's so stupid-pretty and he doesn't even know it. Dream wants to ruffle his hair, pull his metaphorical pigtails. Ball up some paper napkins and throw them at the back of his head. He resists.

(And sneakily takes another photo for his George collection.)

Later that night, when evening has fallen outside and Dream has finished cleaning tables, he flips the sign on the door over to closed. Then he grabs a plate, a piece of cake and two forks.

“Here.” He puts the cake down in front of George and slides into the booth opposite him. He stretches out his long legs out underneath the table, hooks one of his feet around George's ankle and tugs. George jolts forwards on his seat, glares and kicks him in the shin.

“It's that time already?” George looks down at his watch, like Dream hasn't just closed down the entire coffee shop around him. He leaves his foot resting against Dream's ankle. “What's the cake?” He picks up the fork and slices himself off a corner.

“Pistachio and rose.”

George chews thoughtfully, frowns slightly, swallows. "It's... different."

Dream fights back a smile. "Hey, if you don't want it..." He reaches with his own fork to cut off a piece and is thwarted by George's fork as he blocks his move. He parries George and tries again. George stabs his fork down, capturing Dream's fork between the prongs on his own. George's eyes narrow.

"I didn't say that."

Dream rolls his eyes but lets George take another piece of cake before cutting off some of his own.

It's become a bit of a routine for them, sharing cake after the shop is closed, ever since the first time George came to the coffee shop, a night Dream doesn't think he'll ever forget.

Sometimes Sapnap's with them. Tonight he's in the back 'taking stock' (facetimeing Karl) so it's just the two of them.

As they eat, Dream pulls George's notepad towards him, leafing through the notes he's been making for his coding class while they make idle chat about their day. It's nice talking to George. They click in a way Dream never has with anyone else — before *or* since. Not even Sapnap. Sometimes George can be frustrating, sure, when he's being deliberately bratty and contrary, purposefully trying to get a rise out of someone (usually Sapnap), but even when they're bickering and acting like literal children, Dream knows he wouldn't trade them for the world.

He catches George sneaking glances at him a few times, thoughtful, as they talk.

"What?" Dream asks.

"Nothing." George shakes his head. Strands of his dark hair catch the coloured lights of shop signs outside, distorted through the window in the darkness. It's thick, thicker than when they first met, curling around the tops of his ears and into his eyes. He should probably cut it, but Dream kind of likes the softer edge it gives him.

"So," Dream says, when they've finished the cake. He puts his fork down on the plate with a *clink*. "The dating app."

"Don't." George's voice is strained.

"You gonna use it?"

He's not sure why he's so interested, figures it's probably down to him being the one who created the profile for George. He wants to know if he succeeded; he's competitive. He doesn't like losing, and it sort of feels like losing if George doesn't even use it.

George does not look like he's going to use it.

"Come on," Dream says, lowering his voice. "Trust me."

George looks at him for a long time, expression impossible to parse. He's so guarded, sometimes, so hard to read. George bites down on his bottom lip with his teeth, releases it slowly. "You really think I should go on dates with other people?"

There's something off about his phrasing, something Dream can't quite put his finger on. "It's just dates."

“‘Just dates,’ he says,” George mimics him in an unflattering tone, “Like it happens all the time.”

“Well, for someone as hot as *me*—” Dream starts laughing before he can even finish.

“Oh my god.”

“Every— every day of my life is like a date with how much—” Dream wheezes.

“Shut *up!*”

“Jealousy—” he pauses to take a breath, still fighting off laughter, “—is not a good look, George.”

“I’m not jealous!”

“Oh, *sure*. Listen, George, just because *I’ve* actually been on dates and *you* haven’t... or — or maybe you *have*,” Dream says, as the thought occurs to him, “But you’re so bad at them—”

“*Dream!*”

“Is that it? Are you the worst date ever? Is that why you tell people you’ve never been on a date?”

“Dream, I swear—” George makes a move to stab him with his fork.

Dream pulls back, still laughing. “You know there’s only one way to get me to stop, George. Just go on a date, then I’ll—”

“Fine!” declares George.

“Fine?” Dream raises an eyebrow.

“Fine,” George repeats. He’s not quite pouting, but it’s close. “I’ll use the stupid app.”

Somehow, Dream resists punching the air. He wrestles the flood of adrenaline at winning down into a respectable, “Pog.”

George rolls his eyes at him, but the slight curve to the side of his lips says he’s not really mad about it. They fall silent. Dream watches as George toys with his fork, resting the point of the handle on the table and spinning it.

After a few seconds, George asks, “Do you... do you think people will match with me?”

“Yeah,” says Dream, instant. “You’re a catch.” He reaches out to put his hand over George’s to stop him spinning the fork and pay attention to him. “I mean it.” Does George not think people would want him?

George’s gaze flickers down to their hands. He takes a breath. Looks up. “Dream, I—”

“Yeah, Georgie,” Sapnap says, appearing suddenly behind George and slinging an arm around his shoulder. “You’re hot stuff.”

“Get *off!*” The change in atmosphere is instant. George shrugs his shoulders but Sapnap just laughs and leans on him harder. George reaches up, attempting to get him to let go with his free hand. Sapnap easily fends him off. As he does, Sapnap catches sight of where Dream’s hand rests over George’s other hand and raises an eyebrow at him.

Dream pulls his hand away from George’s and leans back, crossing his arms over his chest instead

as they devolve quickly into bickering.

Despite himself, Dream watches them fondly. They're idiots, but they're *his* idiots. The two of them arguing is as much a part of their nightly routine as is him sharing cake with George.

He got lucky, he thinks, going to university in the same place at the same time as these two. The universe conspiring to bring them together. Fate.

Eventually Sapnap and George get bored of sniping and trying to one-up each other, and Dream's able to corral them into getting their things together so they can leave. Outside the shop, George throws his bag over his shoulder and mutters a *thank you* for the cake and the chat about his coding notes, to which Dream shrugs and replies, "No problem."

As George heads off down the street in the opposite direction to them, Sapnap waits for Dream by the door. He lingers as he locks up, shifting restlessly from one foot to the other.

"What?" asks Dream, not looking at him.

"What?" Sapnap mimics him, "I didn't say anything."

"You wanted to though." Dream checks the door handle then tucks the keys in his back pocket. "Spit it out."

"How did you... you know what, never mind." Sapnap shoves his hands in his jacket pockets. They turn and start walking down the street. "George?" he prompts.

"Dream," he corrects, deliberately obtuse. Sapnap elbows him. "Ow, fine. What about George?" He rubs at his arm with his hand.

Sapnap gives him a long look, then focuses on the street ahead. "You know, the dating app thing. You're fine with it?"

Dream frowns. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"Well, you know." Dream doesn't know. He waits for Sapnap to elaborate. Sapnap turns his head to stare at him for what feels like the longest time and then sighs. "Just... are you sure you're okay with it? Like, really okay? George dating?"

"Yeah," says Dream. "Why wouldn't I be?"

Sapnap just looks at him.

"Why are you making it weird?"

"I'm not!"

"You are. It's like we're— we're *exes*, or something, and you're checking to see if my feelings are hurt that he might date someone else."

"Are they?" Sapnap asks quickly. Too quickly.

"What?" Dream asks, narrowing his eyes. "*No*. Of course they're not. It's *George*. He can date whoever he wants. It's nothing to do with — why do you keep *looking* at me like that."

Sapnap mutters something under his breath that Dream can't quite catch. Then, he squares his shoulders and straightens up. "Fine. It's nothing to do with you. But don't say in three months that I

didn't warn you when George is dating someone else and isn't sharing cake with you every night while you have your special little conversations—”

“Fuck *off!*” Dream declares, laughing, and shoves Sapnap in the side. Sapnap, caught off-guard, stumbles, almost falling into a bush at the side of the road, which just makes Dream laugh even harder.

They move onto talking about other things. Dream pushes his hands into his jacket pockets as they walk, elbows occasionally bumping. Even as they chat about university and life and their friends, his thoughts keep drifting back to George and the dating app. He's not sure why, but whenever he thinks about it, there's a strange feeling in his gut. Like he's nervous, only not.

It's just a dating app, he thinks. What can possibly go wrong?

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Thanks for all the kudos and comments so far! Also to Treis for the continued cheering-on (and making a twitter [post](#) for me whilst I hide on anon)

He forgets about the dating app until a week later. He's standing by George's table and chatting idly with him during a lull in service at the coffee shop when George's phone *pings* on the table between them.

The screen lights up, showing the notification, *You've got a match!*

George scrambles to get his phone, nearly knocking over his coffee in the process. Dream catches the mug before it spills and watches, amused, as George hastily unlocks his phone.

"George," says Dream.

George ignores him, swiping away the notification.

"*George*," Dream repeats.

George puts his phone back, screen-down, on the table, pointedly not looking at him.

"*George*, did you just get a match?"

"Ughhhhh," says George, falling back dramatically in his seat. He puts his hands over his face and drags them down. "They just don't *stop*."

For a moment, Dream is genuinely speechless.

Then he starts to grin.

"George... Have you been getting lots of thirsty messages?"

George crumbles. "Yes." He slumps forwards to put his forehead on the table. He doesn't quite hit his head off the surface, but it's close.

"No fucking way," says Dream. He puts the coffee back down and picks up George's phone. He unlocks it easily and opens up the app, navigating to the matches section, then the messages, where he scrolls... and scrolls... and *scrolls*. "Holy shit."

"Yeah," says George, voice muffled by the table. He puts his arms around his head.

Some of these matches are shooting way out of their league, Dream thinks, as he opens up some of the profiles to take a look. There's also quite a few that are rather, uh, forward. He eyes some of the more cringe photos, the kind of thing he'd totally screenshot for blackmail later if he knew the guys.

"Have you replied to any?" he asks.

“No.”

“What? Why not?” Dream looks up from the screen but George still has his head buried in his arms on the table. “The whole point of this app was to get you a date and look at this! Dates!” He waves the phone at George. “Also, several offers to suck your—”

“*Stop*,” George whines.

“No, fuck off, I’m having a *great* time.” Dream scrolls through a few more of the messages, laughing out loud at how awful some are. He had no idea that people could be so *thirsty*.

“Why haven’t you replied to any of them? This one seems kind of cute.” He shows the profile picture to George.

George turns his head to take a look and scrunches up his nose.

“Too cute? Alright, what about this one?” He shows George another, this time the complete opposite: a huge, muscled, tatted guy.

George’s eyes widen when he sees the pic. “No!”

“Why not? Ooh, what about—”

“Dream!” George attempts to snatch his phone back. Dream easily holds it out of his reach above his head. “*Dream*, give it *back*.”

“Why? You’re not using it. You’re not even replying to any of them.” Dream keeps the phone high enough George can’t reach it and tilts the screen so he can see as he keeps scrolling. “Think about their poor, broken hearts, George.”

“Oh my god.”

“All these guys, left in the dust. Treated like they’re *nothing*... Probably crying themselves to sleep...”

George makes another attempt to swipe the phone and misses.

“Seriously though,” says Dream. “Why aren’t you replying?”

George mutters something under his breath, slumping back in his seat.

“George.”

George ignores him.

“*George*.”

“I *said*, none of them stood out to me, okay?” George snaps, probably a little bit louder than he intended, judging by how wide his eyes go after. He looks around the coffee shop quickly, but no one seems to have noticed his little outburst. He sits back, groans and runs his hand over his face again.

“George, that’s not— You know love at first sight is pretty rare, right?” Dream asks.

“Relationships take work. You might not feel it 100% at first but that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t give it a go.”

“What if I already know they’re not... what I want?” George asks.

Dream’s brow furrows. “You can’t possibly know that. No one knows that.”

George turns his head to look at him. His expression is raw, like an exposed nerve. Dream had no idea that he was this much of a romantic, didn’t think George cared so much about meeting the right person.

Eventually, George drops his gaze to his hands, splayed open, palm-up, on the table in front of him.

“Fine,” he sighs. “Let’s say I do go on a date with someone, and it doesn’t work out. What then?”

“So what?” Dream shrugs. “Got to kiss a few frogs before you get your prince, right?”

George looks back at him, expression veiled but thoughtful. “Right,” he says after a pause.

Dream looks down at his watch, checking the time, then back over to the counter - Sapnap’s on his phone, oblivious to the world, no customers in sight. Making a decision, Dream places his hand on George’s shoulder, shoving him up to make room for him in the booth.

“You miss all the shots you don’t take,” he says, putting the phone down on the table between them. “Here, I’ll even help.”

He scrolls through the messages, skipping past the dick pics, discarding anyone who clearly didn’t bother to read the awesome bio Dream wrote, and passing on the ones who are very obviously catfishes. George leans into his side, looking over Dream’s shoulder down at his phone. When Dream’s thumb hovers over someone, unsure whether to swipe left or right, George will hum his agreement or disagreement.

Eventually, they get all George’s propositions whittled down to a respectable ten.

“Alright,” says Dream. “Which one do you like the look of the most?”

“I don’t know?” replies George. “That one?” He points to a random profile. The guy has dark hair, almost black. Blue eyes. Artful stubble. Dream runs a hand over his own jaw, thinking. He’s never tried growing a beard before.

He hands the phone to George. “Send a message then.”

George looks down at the phone in his hands, then back up. He blinks. “What do I say?”

“How do you normally start conversations, idiot? Say hi.”

“I don’t know why I’m going along with this,” George mutters. He leans away from Dream as he types a message, deletes it, types something else, then hits send. “There,” he says. “Happy now?”

“Very.” Dream grins. “That wasn’t so hard, was it? Now, don’t get disheartened if he doesn’t reply str—” He’s interrupted by a *ping!* from George’s phone.

“He replied,” George says, looking up with wide eyes.

Oh. “What does it say?”

George looks down, then back up again. “**Hey**. What do you think it means?”

“Oh my god,” says Dream. “You’re hopeless. It means hey. Ask what he’s up to.”

George frowns at him for a second, as if waiting for the punchline. When none comes, he looks down at his phone and begins to type. Almost immediately after hitting send, he gets another reply. Dream starts to think that maybe this guy is a little *too* keen.

“Not much, you?” George reads dutifully. He looks up again at Dream. **“What do I say? Having coffee with a friend?”**

“No,” Dream says, appalled. **“Do you even... here.”** He takes the phone from George and types back ***nm either.***

The reply comes through instantly. ***Wanna hang?***

Eager, Dream thinks. ***Sure***, he types. ***Where you at?***

He gets a pin to a location on campus not too far from where they are. He shows it to George. **“Looks like you just scored your first date.”**

“What? Dream!” George yells, snatching the phone from his grip and reading the exchange. **“I don't even — what if — it could be someone who wants to murder me!”**

“Or they could be the love of your life.”

“As if.” George snorts.

“True, I'm right here.” Dream flashes him a grin; George rolls his eyes. **“But really? A murderer? Leaving an evidence trail like this? Give them a little credit. Chances are it's who they say they are, probably slightly less airbrushed. What's the worst that could happen? You go on a bad date? Think of it as training.”**

“Training,” George echoes.

“Yeah, for when you *do* meet the love of your life.”

“I thought you were sitting right there.”

“Well, yeah, but I'm not going to date you with no experience, George. I have class; I have standards.” He forms his best smug smile. **“Get yourself on this level first.”**

George looks at him for a long moment. Dream shifts in his seat, suddenly nervous for reasons he can't explain. George looks away first.

“You know what? Fine,” he says. ***Fine.*** I'll go. But if I die, that's on your conscience.”

“I'll throw you the best funeral anyone has ever seen,” Dream promises. **“I'll go into mourning and wear nothing but black for a year and weep very dramatically whenever anyone says your name.”**

“You're such an idiot,” George replies, but it's fond.

Dream grins, knowing that he's won.

George sighs and then straightens up in his seat. He uses his shoulder to shove at Dream's side until Dream gets the hint and slides to the edge of the booth seat so he can get to his feet. George finishes the last of his coffee then stands up next to him.

Then, rather than just heading straight out to his date, George pauses. He takes a breath, exhales it

slowly slowly. Straightens his hoodie. Glances nervously back down at his phone.

On impulse, Dream lifts his hand, intending to mess up George's hair to make him laugh and put him at ease, but George tilts his head up, catching his eyes, and he looks so vulnerable and nervous in that moment that something in Dream goes impossibly *soft*. Instead, Dream straightens George's hair, combing through the thick length and patting down a few flyaway strands. George lets him, big stupid doe eyes peering up at him.

Dream's always known that he's taller than George - he makes jokes about it often enough - but it feels different, somehow, when they're standing facing each other like this, George's face tilted up towards his, Dream's hand in his hair. If he wanted to, Dream could curl his hand around the back of George's neck, tilt his head up and—

He drops his hand and takes a step back, confused.

George blinks up at him. "Dream?"

Dream shakes away the thought, brings forth what he hopes is a reassuring smile. "There," he says, "Less tired, sleep-deprived student and more tired, sleep-deprived student who has attempted to brush his hair." He winks. "Knock 'em dead."

The smile George gives him is nervously optimistic. "Right," he says quietly, as if to himself. "Right." Then he squares his shoulders and heads out. Dream watches him go.

It feels a bit strange watching George leave, knowing that he's going on a date. Nerves tangle in Dream's stomach. He imagines it's a bit like how a proud parent would feel sending their child out into the world only... not.

The unsettled feeling lingers, heavy on his shoulders. He's distracted for the rest of his shift.

Two hours later, George walks back through the door, glares murderously at Dream, then stomps over to his table and sits down.

"Woah," says Sapnap. "What did you *do*?"

Dream has no idea.

He quickly makes up George's coffee order and heads over to his table. "Hey," he says tentatively, putting it down in front of George.

"That was the worst experience of my life and I hate you," George says, non sequitur. He takes the coffee and drinks half of it in one go.

"Wow, hi," says Dream. He has to fight back a grin that's already tugging at his lips. *This isn't funny*. "Date not go well?"

"No," George says vehemently. "Do you know the entire plot of the MCU? Because *now I do*—"

"In two hours?" asks Dream, fully grinning now, "That's pretty impressive—"

"I wanted to *die*. I have never been so bored in my *life*. He asked if I wanted to go back to his and watch the first film, said we could watch the rest for our next few dates."

"What did you say?" Dream asks, disingenuous.

“No!” George looks at him like he’s lost his mind. “I said I couldn’t go watch films with him; I’m allergic to superheroes, and then I got the hell out of there.”

Dream laughs so hard he starts wheezing. “George!”

“I panicked!”

“Oh, *George*.” Dream’s laughing so hard he’s wheezing. He can totally imagine it, George trying to show interest at first, pretending he knows more than he does. Eventually just staring dumbly at his date. “You should have just texted me.”

“You were working.”

“So? Sapnap and I are on our phones all the time. If you need an out from a bad date, George, you can always message me.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

George smiles up at him. Dream smiles back down. Whilst he feels bad that George’s first date didn’t go well, he’s glad he made it out alive, and it’s one significant hurdle out of the way. He holds his hand out for George’s phone.

George hands it over automatically. “What are you doing?”

“Getting you another date.” Dream unlocks the phone and opens the app back up.

“What? Why? I already went on a stupid date.”

“A *bad* one,” Dream reminds him. “Doesn’t count. I — *we’re* trying to get you a good date.”

“Alex and Karl aren’t even here.”

“I don’t care.” Dream has already found a potential suitor, is typing up a message to them as he speaks. “You deserve to go on a good date, George. Plus, like I said, how are you gonna win over the love of your life if you don’t know how to *successfully* date someone?”

George rolls his eyes. “This is such a dumb idea.”

“Trust me,” Dream says.

George raises his eyebrows, sceptical, but doesn’t take his phone back. He sighs and reaches again for his coffee. “Just... promise me no more Marvel fans.”

“No more Marvel fans,” Dream promises, and hits send on the message.

The next guy he sets George up with proclaims to love video games in his bio.

George comes to the coffee shop the following day talking about an extremely competitive game of bowling that turned into an extremely competitive meal (“How can a *meal* be competitive?” Niki asks. “No, no,” Sapnap and Dream say at the same time, waving her off, *they get it*).

The guy Dream chooses after that doesn’t mention video games at all in his bio, and is apparently

so uncompetitive and laid back he's utterly *boring*, and George spends the entire time they're having bubble tea texting Dream under the table.

"What's up lads!" Tommy declares as he enters the coffee shop, 50% too loud and 100% oblivious to all the glares thrown in his direction. He has Toby and Jack with him, probably straight out of their media lecture. They make a beeline for where Wilbur is already at the counter, chatting to Dream. "Did I just see *George* on a date?"

Dream feels several pairs of eyes turn in his direction. "What?" he asks.

"Nothing," says Wilbur. He's half-smiling, so Dream isn't entirely sure he trusts him.

"You knew about this?" Toby asks, surprised.

"Gogy," Tommy says, emphasising the name as if Dream has no idea who he's talking about. He puts his hands on the edge of the counter and leans forwards as he repeats: "On a *date*."

"Yeah," says Dream, leaning back away from him slightly, not sure why they're all being weird about this. "I set it up for him — *what*?" he demands, as once again all eyes are turned on him.

"You set it up for him?" asks Jack. "You organised for George to go on a date?"

"Yeah?" Why is this so difficult for them to understand? "He's useless. Even when he got a match on that dating app, he didn't know what to do. I had to do it for him."

"You messaged someone for him," Wilbur says, sounding a little strained, "On a dating app. *You*. Pretended to be George. To get him a date."

"Dates," Dream corrects. "Plural." He is *good* at this match-making business, even if George keeps having the worst dates ever. Dream just has to find him the right guy.

"Gogy has been going on *dates*?" Tommy shrieks, loud enough that several people in the coffee shop turn around to look in their direction. "Since *when*?"

"About three weeks ago?" Dream asks. "Alex and Karl wanted to set him up because apparently he'd never been on a date before."

"But what about the late night cake things he has with y—" Toby pipes up and is rapidly shushed by Wilbur.

"No, no," says Wilbur, "I want to see how this plays out."

Dream gives him a strange look. "You're being weird."

Tommy barks out a laugh. "*We're* being weird?" He pushes back away from the counter. "Sure thing, big man."

"I can't believe George is dating," Jack says, shaking his head. "*George*."

"It's not going well," Dream admits. "Yet, anyway. I've - *we've* just got to find him the right guy."

"Right," says Wilbur.

"Sounds sus," Tommy says. "Gogy's great. Who wouldn't want to date him?"

“Oh, they all want to date him,” Dream says. “The dates *themselves* just aren’t any good.”

“Huh,” says Tommy.

“But—” Toby tries again. Wilbur speaks over him: “So you’re saying... None of these other guys are right for George?”

“Yeah,” says Dream.

Wilbur hums. His expression is low-key amused, but there’s something behind his eyes Dream doesn’t trust. He always seems so laid back, but Dream thinks Wilbur is far more switched on than he lets on — especially around Tommy.

“Sounds fake,” Tommy says, “But okay. Anyway, can we get some coffee?”

“I’m not sure it’s a good idea to give you caffeine,” Dream drawls, “Are we even allowed to feed you after midnight?”

As Tommy squawks in outrage and the others laugh, Dream starts making their drinks anyway, without being asked.

George’s next date is with Martin. Martin seems like a nice enough guy from his profile. He’s a few years older than George but interested in the things he’s interested in. Good profile pics, not *quite* thirst traps, but with definite potential.

40 minutes into his first date with Martin, George comes through the coffee shop door, hair dripping wet and a scowl on his face.

“No to Martin?” Dream asks.

“Martin’s nice,” George replies. “Martin’s *friends* are dicks.”

“Right,” says Dream and opens up the app again. It’s become a bit of a point of pride for him, finding George the perfect date. He *refuses* to lose at this.

Date number six spends the entire time talking about his ex.

Date number seven gets a Snapchat *from* his ex whilst they’re on their date — *and replies to it*.

Despite this, Dream thinks date number eight is the worst.

Date number eight has the audacity to try and take George to a different coffee shop.

“The coffee was awful,” George tells him the next day, “And the barista didn’t *once* try and hit on me with some cheesy pick-up line.”

“My pick-up lines are not cheesy!”

George grins. “Who said anything about you?”

Dream glares at him and pushes his coffee across the counter. There’s no heart in the foam this time, just a smiley face.

“I mean, the guy was nice enough,” George says, “And the date was... fine.” Dream chokes on his laughter. “But there just wasn’t any spark, you know? I didn’t feel like I could spend hours talking to him and not get bored.”

Dream knows what he means; it’s difficult to find someone with a connection like that. He’s still amazed that he managed to find George himself. That first time they’d met, when George had fallen asleep at his table and Dream had woken him up to tell him they were closing, then they’d somehow ended up staying in way past closing, sharing cake and talking...

The sun was already dawning when they finally parted ways. Golden rays on George’s hair as he walked away. When Dream got back to his room there wasn’t any time to sleep and so he ended up getting changed and going straight to his first lecture of the day.

“Well,” he says, “They can’t all be as awesome as me.”

George rolls his eyes. “Now that I think about it, the latte art *was* better—“

“Hey! I’m a master at latte art!”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t realise a line and two dots for eyes was peak artistry.”

“Fuck off,” Dream replies, but he’s grinning.

George smirks back at him, infuriating and bratty. He never backs down when he thinks he’s hit a nerve. “*Dream,*” he says, “Have you been lying to me all this time? Are you actually doing a fine art degree? Are you an artiste?”

“You know what? You asked for this.” Dream very deliberately leans back from the counter and calls out, “Hey, Sapnap! Did you know George cheated on us and went to a different coffee shop?”

“What the *fuck*?” Sapnap hollers, coming out the back room immediately, brandishing a dish towel. “*George!* How could you?”

Dream starts keeping a mental list of all the things George likes about his dates after that.

So far it reads:

- Easy to talk to
- Has great friends
- Competitive but not a dick about it
- Knows where to get good coffee
- Makes good latte art

It’s not the most exhaustive list but it’s a start.

“You don’t really mind the bad dates, do you?” he asks, later that evening when they’re sharing cake. Sapnap’s gone home early, whining about an early lecture that means he has to get up before midday, leaving Dream to close up the coffee shop alone.

George cuts himself off a piece of cake with the side of his fork. “I cry myself to sleep every night.”

Dream snipes the piece of cake, spearing it with his fork and then shoving it straight into his mouth. George glares at him. He grins and swallows. “Seriously though.”

George lets out a long breath. “I mean, yeah, at first.” He cuts himself another piece of cake but rather than eat it, he just pushes it around the plate a few times.

“But...” Dream prompts.

“*But...*” George picks up the piece of cake with his fork. “It’s not... too bad? Some of them have been fun in their own way. Plus, it’s not like any of them have tried to *murder* me or anything.”

The corner of Dream’s mouth lifts, almost into a smile. “Right.”

“And I guess... it’s kind of helpful for me figuring out who— *what* I want — or at least, what I don’t want.”

Dream reaches across the table, presses his fingertips to George’s knuckles. “George, if you want me to stop setting you up, I will.”

“You really mean that?” George asks, looking up at him.

“Yeah,” says Dream. “I made the bio because I want to find what’s right.”

George frowns. “What do you mean?”

Dream withdraws his hand, pushing it back through his own hair instead, tousling the strands. “I want you to meet someone right for you. Someone who appreciates you, treats you right. I know it sounds lame, but, you know.” *You deserve to be loved.* He looks down at the table, then up at the ceiling, anywhere he can to avoid looking at George himself.

He’s a little raw and exposed, stripped bare, admitting that to George.

He can feel the weight of George’s gaze on him. Dream thinks he’s smiling, that stupid smile he gets when he thinks Dream is being particularly cute.

“You’re actually really sweet, aren’t you?” George asks.

“Fuck off.”

Dream glares at him; George grins back.

“Is it really that weird?” Dream asks, defensive. He sits back in his seat, crossing his arms over his chest, “That I want you to be happy?”

“I don’t know,” George replies softly. “Is it?”

Dream thinks about it. *Really* thinks about it. For as long as he’s known, he’s always been like this for his friends. Acts of service are how he shows his affection.

“No,” he says. “I’d do the same for any of my friends.”

“Right,” says George, “Friends.”

George looks down at the cake between them then flicks his gaze back up to Dream’s. The light is back in his eyes when he says, “Fine, you can keep setting me up. Just... no more English Majors, yeah?”

Dream makes a questioning noise.

“Do you know how many pitches I’ve heard for novels in the last month?” There’s real pain in George’s voice. “It’s awful — *they’re* awful. Why are they so bad, Dream?”

Dream laughs. “Beats me. I’m not an English Major, remember?”

“Oh, yeah, you’re studying fine art—” George breaks off into laughter when Dream attempts to kick him under the table.

“If I’m studying fine art, then I guess I won’t help you with your next piece of botched code,” Dream retaliates. He slices himself off another piece of the cake and smirks at George before eating it.

George snorts. “Yeah you will.”

“Nope,” Dream replies, knowing that he 100% will. He has a stupid soft spot for George when he pouts and says that he needs his help.

George tilts his chin up. “Then *I* guess there’s no point in us going to tomorrow’s lectures together.”

Dream gasps. “Is that it? Am I just a tool to you George? Someone to use for my programming knowledge and then discarded...” His voice wobbles. He sniffs as if he’s about to start crying.

“You *let* me!” George replies. “I don’t even have to say I’m stuck on something, I’ll just moan about it and then you’re like *ugh*,” he puts on an unflattering attempt at Dream’s accent, “*Just give it to me and I’ll do it.*”

“Lies,” says Dream. “Lies and slander.”

George laughs and they turn onto other topics. As they talk, George keeps sending furtive looks at the plate on the table between them. There’s only a small piece of cake left, enough for just one bite. He probably thinks he’s being subtle but Dream can read him like an open book.

Rolling his eyes, Dream puts his own fork down and pushes the plate over to George.

George’s grin is brighter than the streetlights outside as he takes the last piece of cake and Dream thinks: *I have such a soft spot for this idiot.*

That evening in bed, Dream adds another two bullet points to his list:

- Isn’t an English Major (maybe something with computers?? Can/will help George out)
- Gives George the last piece of cake

There’s got to be *someone* out there who meets every criterion on his list. How hard can it be?

Chapter 3

“We just saw George at a *skatepark*,” Karl announces, entering the shop with Sapnap in tow.

“‘We’?” Dream echoes, looking past him to Sapnap and raising an eyebrow.

Sapnap pulls a face back at him over Karl’s shoulder. He’s carrying a checkered skateboard under his arm, Karl has a purple and turquoise one under his own. They’ve been attempting to learn how to skate for the last few months. Dream isn’t sure who suggested it first, but is pretty sure that anything Karl decides to do, Sapnap does too.

“We were there practising our sick moves when I saw this very familiar little figure in the distance,” Karl explains as he drops his board to the floor, resting it against the side of the counter where Dream is.

“Emphasis on little,” says Sapnap, unable to resist a jab at George’s height, even when he’s not around to hear it.

“He wasn’t skating,” Karl continues, as he crosses his arms on top of the counter and leans against it. “He was just sat at the top of the ramp whilst this other dude skated and he watched.”

Dream tries to picture it, George sitting on the edge of a ramp with his legs dangling, watching as some guy shows off various tricks and flips, George smiling in that casual, easy way he does when he’s relaxed. The skater boy doing everything he can to show off and impress him, the way people always do, whenever they’re around George. Dream can totally imagine it.

Then, the image in his mind shifts. They’ve all seen the video: the girl sitting at the top of a ramp, the guy skating up, holding himself up on one arm upside down as he kisses her then drops back down the ramp.

He frowns.

“Guy knew what he was doing,” Sapnap says, drawing Dream back from his thoughts. “I mean, he wasn’t as good as us, obviously...”

“George looked pretty into it,” Karl says. “Who knew Gogy liked skater boys?”

“He was a skater boy, hoping George doesn’t say ‘see you later, boy’?” Sapnap asks, grinning.

Dream rolls his eyes as Karl laughs like it’s the funniest thing he’s ever heard “George doesn’t like skaters,” he says.

“Why’s he on a date with one, then?” Sapnap challenges.

“Experience,” Dream replies.

“For *what*?”

Dream shrugs. “The right person?”

“What does that even mean?” asks Karl.

“Who even *is* the right person for George?” Sapnap asks. “What does *he* want?”

It's a question that's been bugging Dream for the last month and a half. Besides the qualities he already has on his mental list, he's not sure, and it's not as if George has been very forthcoming with his interests, just letting Dream set up his dates for him.

George has always been pretty quiet and private, rarely giving anything of himself or what he really thinks, but Dream gets glances of it, sometimes. The real him underneath. Usually in low murmurs and late night conversation, a quiet coffee shop and a shared piece of cake between them.

"I don't think George even knows what he wants," Karl muses.

"George never commits to anything," Sapnap says, the whine evident in his voice. "Like it — I dunno, like it's giving up part of him to be vulnerable."

"Remember that time you were trying to kiss him?" Karl asks, grinning sunshine-bright. "You were like *come here and kiss me, idiot* and he was so uncomfortable." Despite himself, Dream smiles at the memory.

"He doesn't even let me hug him!" Sapnap pouts. "Well, he *does*... but it's like wrestling with an angry cat first. One that's been dunked in water and hates all humans."

"Oh come on," says Dream, "He's not that bad. He shows he cares in other ways."

Like always answering his phone whenever Dream calls. Or that time he worked into the early hours of the morning on Sapnap's assignment with him a few months back when he was stuck even though he had an exam at 7 the next morning. Or how he always shows up to everyone's events - birthday nights out, random cinema trips, impromptu trips to the park, late night runs for fast food - even moaning and kicking up a fuss, saying he's too tired and he can't be bothered. When it matters he's always *there*.

"He doesn't wax lyrical about his friends or how he feels, but he *does* have feelings," Dream defends him. "If he didn't, why would he be going on all these dates?"

"I *still* think it's weird George is dating," Sapnap admits. "I mean really? Gogy? Dates? He's like the least romantic person I know. He's never seemed interested in anyone that way. I mean, apart from..." Sapnap trails off. "You know..."

Dream waits.

The silence holds.

He waves a hand at Sapnap, impatient. "Apart from *what*?"

"You know," Sapnap repeats, sounding strained.

When Dream just blinks back at him, Sapnap turns to Karl, eyes pleading. "*You* know what I mean, right? Don't tell me I'm the only one who—"

"No, no, I get you," Karl replies instantly, nodding. His hair is so long now it bounces.

Sapnap's shoulders slump as he relaxes. "Thank God."

Karl continues, "I just don't think it's *only* George, you know?"

Dream has no idea what the hell they're talking about.

Sapnap's gaze snaps to his.

“Ohhhhhhhh,” says Sapnap. “Okay. Well.”

Dream blinks. “What the hell are you on about? Did I miss something?”

“Well, *yeah*,” Sapnap says, the *duh* evident in his voice. He turns to Karl. “But, like, putting that aside, I think you’ve got a point there, about George not knowing what he wants — or not admitting to it. I never know what George is really thinking. He keeps so much to himself.”

“Maybe it’s self-preservation,” Karl says. “He doesn’t want to be hurt.”

The idea of one of these dates hurting George makes Dream frown. So far all of his failures have been light-hearted, George relaying the stories with a deprecating half-smile, not really all that upset by them, but Dream supposes if George manages to find someone he really likes there will then be the possibility of him getting hurt.

He doesn’t like that idea.

Karl nods thoughtfully. “George likes splashing around in the shallows of feeling rather than exploring romantic depths. Less chance to be dragged under and drowned.”

Dream and Sapnap both stare at him.

“What?” Karl asks when he notices them staring. His cheeks tinge pink.

“That’s deep, man,” says Sapnap.

Karl lets out a nervous bubble of laughter and reaches out to shove his shoulder. “Fuck off.”

Sapnap grins and shoves him back. They spend a few seconds just pushing each other and laughing, lingering hands and touches. Dream rolls his eyes to the ceiling. *What was that about people being oblivious?* He thinks.

“Or,” says Karl, grinning as he holds Sapnap off with one hand pressed to his chest, “George just wants to break as many hearts as possible. Sleep his way through the entire campus whilst he’s still young and hot.” He laughs. “Can’t blame him for trying different things out, though.”

“I guess,” says Sapnap, sounding dubious. He’s like Dream: fiercely protective when it comes to George, though he shows it in different ways.

“I wouldn’t mind a hot skater boy of my own though,” Karl says, wiggling his eyebrows at Sapnap.

Dream groans loudly as Sapnap flushes bright red.

“Have you discovered anything you *do* like yet?” Dream asks a few days later as he scrolls through the dating app on George’s phone.

He’s not on shift today and is instead sitting at George’s table with both him and Wilbur, studying.

“Not really,” says George. (*So the skater boy can’t have been that great, Dream thinks, ha.*)

Without looking up from his textbook, Wilbur says, “He likes blonds.”

George cuts a glare in his direction.

“Green eyes,” Wilbur continues, ignoring him, a small smile forming at the corner of his mouth.

Dream has green eyes. It’s not the most common colour. He wonders how many other people in the world have them and ends up losing the next ten minutes to a Google search to find out. Turns out it’s one of the rarer colours. Trust George to have such specific tastes. No wonder he’s had so much trouble getting dates.

Wait.

“I don’t think I’ve set you up with any blonds,” Dream says, scrolling back through the past matches George has had. Nope. No blonds.

“Um,” says George.

“Really?” drawls Wilbur, finally tilting his head up. He brushes curls out of his eyes with the back of his hand so he can look straight at Dream. “Huh.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Dream whines. George very pointedly does not look him in the eye. “I swear...”

He adds:

- Blond

to his mental list and starts rapidly deleting matches on the app, removing anyone who isn’t blond. The green eyes thing is a bit more specific - he’d be left with, like, no one - so he ignores that for now.

The list of potential matches is way smaller now, but hopefully more precise as a result. He has to be close to finding the right person. He can feel it, like a song building under his skin, music heard playing in another room. What else is he missing? What more criteria does he need?

He sneaks a glance out of the corner of his eyes at George as he drinks his coffee.

They’re sitting close, close enough Dream could count the scatter of freckles across the bridge of George’s nose, if he wanted to. He can see every one of his eyelashes, dark where they brush against his skin when he blinks. Noticing his attention, George tilts his head back slightly, looking up at him.

The height difference between them is big, but not too big. It wouldn’t be hard to close the distance between them, Dream thinks. His arm rests along the back of the chair behind George, fingertips just skimming the top of his shoulder.

His gaze skitters across George’s face. His dark eyes, the slope of his nose, his mouth.

George takes a drink of his coffee. His tongue darts out, catching a stray drop from his bottom lip
—

A thought occurs to Dream. “Have you made out with any of them?”

George chokes on his drink. “What?” he asks, hoarse.

“Your dates,” Dream says. “Have you made out with any of them?”

“No...?” George is blushing, it’s kind of cute. He puts down his coffee.

“Gogy is an innocent,” Wilbur says, from across the table, faux-outraged. “I can’t believe you would ask him this. He’s never had an impure thought, ever, in his life.”

George glares at him. “Shut up.”

“Maybe that’s where you’re going wrong,” Dream muses, thinking of his conversation with Sappnap and Karl. Would making out with someone drag George down into the depths of real feeling? Take him from casual dates that don’t mean anything into something more? “I did say *kiss* a few frogs, after all.”

George stares at him. “You want me to kiss my dates.”

“Yeah,” says Dream. “Practice, remember?”

Of *course* George is never going to find the perfect date if he doesn’t even kiss them. It makes so much sense. No wonder the whole dating thing hasn’t worked out for him yet. Dream is so *stupid*.

“Practice,” George echoes. His voice still sounds a little strained.

“You’ve got this, Gogy,” Wilbur says. “Chin up.”

“Is that a *hickey*?!” Alex screeches at the top of his lungs, a week later.

Dream looks up from where he’s serving a customer and over to George’s usual table. George is wrestling off Alex, who is attempting to pull his shirt down to reveal more of his neck as Karl laughs on, refusing to help. They’ve only been in the shop for approximately 2 minutes and already they’re causing a scene.

“George, my man! As I live and breathe!” Alex declares, when he finally gets a good look.

Even from this distance, Dream can see: it *is* a hickey.

Oh, he thinks.

He’s not sure why he’s so surprised. After all, he did tell George to go and make out with his dates.

Dream guesses it’s just because he’s never really thought about George like that before, as someone who goes and makes out with people, gets hickies. Like, sure, he’s known George has had random flings before after various house parties and nights out, but that’s different, somehow. This feels *purposeful*.

For a second, Dream’s mind escapes him, sensory overload as he thinks about skin, lips, tongue and *teeth*.

When he comes back to himself, Alex, George and Karl have calmed down and he can no longer hear their conversation. They’ve clearly moved on to something else, the three of them bickering back and forth. The collar of George’s shirt is still loose from where Alex tugged on it, when he gestures with his hands to make a point Dream can see the hickey in full sight.

Dream realises during his daze he’s served four customers and has no idea at all what they’ve ordered.

He forces himself to concentrate, to act like a totally normal, rational human being, and manages to

have an actual conversation with the next person he serves.

His gaze keeps being drawn to the hickey as he works. He's not sure he would have noticed it, if Alex hadn't been so dramatic.

At one point he sees George running his fingertips over it absently and Dream's mind conjures up images of how George got it, dark nightclubs and even darker corners. George's eyes looking up as he tilts his head to one side for easy access... catching his own lip between his bottom teeth...

The coffee Dream is currently making overflows onto his hand. He swears and hisses in a sharp breath through his teeth, stepping back to the sink and turning on the cold tap to run his hand underneath. Sappnap laughs at him, unsympathetic.

Dream's careful to keep his thoughts on task for his next orders.

"Dream, look!" Alex declares, when Dream walks past their table awhile later, collecting mugs and plates in a tray. Alex attempts to drag George's shirt collar down again even though the hickey is already fully on show.

"Yes," says Dream, resting his tray on his hip. "I see."

George's eyes snap to his, even as he continues to fight off Alex's wandering hands.

"Was it good?" Dream's throat feels dry. He swallows.

"The kissing?" George asks. "Yeah."

Dream actually meant the date, but he supposes they're one in the same. Still, he frowns slightly, eyebrows drawing together, not sure how he feels about George talking about making out with his date. Too much information.

"Soooo will there be a second date?" Karl asks, sing-song.

"Never," George says, firm.

"What!!!" Alex declares. Dream can literally *hear* the exclamation points. "Why not!!!!"

"He didn't ask me a single question about myself. Just talked and talked and *talked*. I kissed him to shut him up."

"*George!*" Alex yells as Dream wheezes.

"He was actually a pretty decent date when he stopped talking," George muses.

Alex shrieks with laughter. "Sick burn bro."

"*Darling*," Karl says in sympathy, with a perfunctory half-glare at Alex. He reaches over to pat George on the shoulder, ends up playing with a few strands of his hair. Dream watches the curls around his fingertips. "Don't worry, I'm sure you'll find someone who actually wants to talk and know all about you."

"I might keep him on speed dial though," George says, tilting his head to give Karl better access. "For things that don't require talking."

Alex chokes on his drink.

Dream adds

- Good kisser

to his mental list.

(Dream is a great kisser.)

It's almost as if a switch is flicked, after that.

Whilst Dream keeps being the one to set George up on dates, the style and quality of them seems to change. Instead of simple first dates to restaurants and coffee shops and skateparks, George ends up at bars and clubs and very definitely gets laid.

He doesn't get any more obvious hickey's like the first one, but the campus is small and their friendship group is large and so a lot of people see him making out in various places with his dates.

"George has really committed himself to this dating thing, huh?" Puffy asks him one morning as he makes her coffee, gentle words and gentle eyes. She's the older sister Dream never had.

"Yeah," says Dream, "Good for him."

And it really is. Good for George that he's getting some action — and if it makes Dream think about how he currently isn't getting any, well, that's a thought he's just going to bury and deal with later. He's plenty in demand. He could date anyone he wanted to.

There's just... no one that he really wants, right now.

Then: the house party happens.

Dream doesn't go to every party his friends invite him to; not a big drinker, he prefers spending his time with his friends when they're actually lucid and know their own names. Occasionally, however, he lets himself loose, usually after a stressful few weeks of studying or after a concerted effort by Sappnap and Karl after he's spent one-too-many weeks being a hermit.

It's December and there's a restless feeling under his skin, like he forgot something and can't quite place what. His friends have been spamming him with Snapchats all evening and he's on top of all his studying so, after locking up on the late shift, he heads straight to Sam's.

When he arrives, the house party is already in full swing, music thumping and laughter swelling. It echoes down the streets, lighting up the night sky. There's a buzz humming under his skin.

A few people call out his name as he heads up through the garden, people he knows from classes and various friends-of-friends. He lifts a hand at them in a wave as he takes the steps up to the door two at a time.

Sam greets him just inside the hall, two beers in hand and eyebrows raised. "You actually leave the coffee shop?"

Dream takes one of the beers. “Shut up.”

“Is this a competitive thing?” Sam asks, “Because Techno’s here? You can’t be out-partied?”

“Techno’s here?” Dream asks, looking around.

Technically, Techno works at the coffee shop too, has for possibly even longer than Dream, but his work schedule is a complete and utter mystery. Dream never knows when he’s going to show up and be on shift and, most of the time, it seems like Techno doesn’t know either.

Somehow, Techno still wins more employee of the month awards than him.

It’s *frustrating*.

Sam’s knowing laughter brings Dream’s attention back to him. He feels heat on the back of his neck and ignores it as he mutters, “Shut up.” He pushes Sam’s shoulder as he walks past him, further into the house.

He finds Techno with Wilbur and Phil, chilling out on one of the sofas in the main living area, passing a bottle of cheap vodka back and forth. They’re laughing about something, free and easy, Techno’s legs thrown over Wilbur’s lap as he leans back against Phil’s side. They’re quiet but not subdued, their own little oasis amidst the revelry.

“Hey,” Wilbur says, spotting him.

Phil’s smile is genuine. “Hey Dream.”

“Ugh,” says Techno, “Dream’s here?” Wilbur pinches his leg and Techno jumps, nearly spilling vodka everywhere. “Kidding, kidding! Ha. Ha. Hey, Dream. Great to see you, man.”

Once upon a time Dream would have genuinely been hurt by Techno’s indifference to him. Now he knows it’s just what Techno’s like. Sarcasm as his first line of defence, never quite willing to admit just how much he cares. Kind of like George, only not. Speaking of — Dream looks around the room.

“You seen George yet?” Wilbur asks, reading his mind.

Dream shakes his head. “You know where he is?”

“Somewhere. He...” Wilbur pauses, like he wants to say more, then takes the vodka from Techno, offering it to him. “Want some? You’re gonna need it.”

What an odd thing to say. Dream scrunches up his nose. “No, thanks.” He might be drinking tonight, but he’s not desperate enough for cheap vodka shots.

Wilbur shrugs and takes a swig. “Your loss.”

“I think the rest of your crew are in the back,” Phil says, gesturing with his thumb over his shoulder. Dream nods his thanks and leaves them, heading in the direction Phil pointed.

In the next room over, Sapnap, Alex and Karl are in sharp comparison to Wilbur, Techno and Phil, well on their way to being totally wasted and loudly challenging anyone within a two metre vicinity to a round of shots. For some reason, Alex is wearing a lei around his neck. Sapnap has glo paint on his cheekbones.

Karl throws an arm around Dream instantly the moment he spots him. He’s an affectionate drunk,

more handsy even than normal. His gangly frame means he usually drapes himself all over the objects of his affection; in Dream's case he can just about rest his chin on his shoulder.

"Hello," Dream says, amused.

"Hello, handsome," Karl replies.

Sapnap and Alex immediately erupt in complaints. Dream laughs and leaves them to it, eyes searching the rest of the room. When he brings his attention back to his friends, Sapnap catches his expression and raises a questioning eyebrow.

"Have you seen George?" Dream asks.

"George?" Karl's expression is blurry, he blinks a few times as he refocuses. "I think he was in the hall? Or maybe upstairs? Could have been in the kitchen. I dunno. Definitely in the house."

"Have *you* seen George?" Sapnap asks, like it means something. Dream frowns at him.

"George is with his *date*," Alex announces obnoxiously and makes a lewd gesture.

"Ugh, what?" asks Dream.

This is supposed to be a boys' night. They'd talked about it in the group chat. Dream had missed the last house party, on a late shift at the coffee shop, and George had missed the one before that, too busy *sleeping* or something. Tonight's the first night they all get to be together in ages and Dream's not letting some random date who George probably won't even look at twice ruin that.

"Enough about George," Sapnap says, "It's time for more shots."

Alex and Karl cheer. Alex shoves four sticky-looking and obviously already well-used shot glasses over the table towards Sapnap, who unscrews a bottle of something and starts to pour.

"Let me just find George," Dream says, lifting Karl's arm from his shoulders. Karl pouts up at him, big blue eyes looking like he cancelled Christmas.

"*Dream*," Sapnap whines.

"I'll be right back," Dream promises.

"*Dream*," Alex says, with more of an edge to his voice. There's a challenge in the way he says it, like there is sometimes, usually when someone mentions George between them. Alex lets him get away with far less than Sapnap.

Dream looks straight at him and reaches for one of the shots. Without breaking eye contact, he downs it, then places the glass back down on the table.

Alex grins.

Dream wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, fighting a grimace and the burn at the back of his throat. "There. *Now* can I go and find George?"

"Your funeral," Sapnap mutters, which makes no sense at all. Dream ignores him.

"Come back soon, love," Karl calls after him as he heads back out of the room, "I miss you already!"

Dream waves a hand back over his shoulder.

He heads to the kitchen first - the life and soul of any party - and whilst he finds several of their other friends (and is waylaid for a good ten minutes by Punz) George is nowhere in sight. Someone directs him back to the living area he came through on his way in but George isn't there either.

"Dream!" Niki announces back in the hallway, smiling brightly from where she's tucked under Jack's arm.

Dream flashes her a genuine smile. "Hey."

"Have you, um, seen George?" she asks.

"No," he replies, "Why does everyone keep... I've been looking for him everywhere. Do you know where he is?"

"He's with some guy," Jack answers. He wriggles his eyebrows, "Or maybe that should be *in*—"

Niki elbows him in the side. "He's upstairs. Are you sure—"

"Great, thanks," Dream cuts her off. *Finally*. He takes the stairs up to the second floor two at a time easily with his long legs. There's a sharp turn at the top onto the landing, an open door on his right to his bathroom, two closed doors next to it and a window at the far end.

George is sitting on the windowsill.

He has his legs slightly hitched up, one ankle curved around the back of his date's leg. Between his thighs is some tall blond guy, his back to Dream. One of George's hands is in his date's hair, fingers tugging on the strands, the other is curved around his shoulder, pulling him in close.

George and his date are kissing.

They both look very into it.

Dream turns and walks back down the stairs.

Back in the kitchen, he runs into Techno.

Techno is currently inspecting a selection of bottles in a cabinet which very definitely looks like it was locked before he arrived. Dream steps up beside him and immediately helps himself to the yellow-gold tequila bottle.

Techno tilts his head back to watch, faintly amused, as Dream unscrews the cap and takes a swig right from the bottle. Techno's eyebrows rise as Dream swallows. He looks like he wants to say something.

"What?" Dream asks, defensive. His throat burns. His eyes water. At the back of his mind: George.

"Nothing," says Techno. He crosses his arms and leans back against the counter.

Dream's fingers tighten on the neck of the tequila bottle.

"Are you going to ask me about George too?"

Techno blinks. “Who’s George?”

Thank fuck, Dream thinks, whilst also being offended on George’s behalf. He bites back the urge to say, ‘You don’t know George?’ because even *he’s* self-aware enough to know that saying something like that will only add to the weird way everyone’s acting.

He thinks he gets now why everyone was asking if he’d seen George.

“Nevermind,” says Dream and takes another swig of the tequila. It doesn’t burn any less the second time.

Techno stares at him. “O-kaaaay.”

Dream begins searching the rest of the kitchen for some salt and limes — hell, he’ll even take lemons. Anything to neutralise the taste of fire on the back of his tongue right now.

Tongues, he thinks, mind immediately sliding elsewhere.

“Alright,” says Techno. “Tell me about George.”

Dream lifts his head. “What?”

“You brought him up first.”

“You really want to know?” Dream stares at him.

“No, not really. But I have a feeling you’re going to monologue at me anyway.”

Dream waits for the punchline but Techno just looks back at him, coolly impassive. As far as Dream knows, Techno very much lives his life oblivious to everyone else’s drama. Does Techno even date? Dream has no fucking clue.

Maybe he *is* the perfect person to talk to.

To hell with it, thinks Dream.

“I mean,” says Dream, “I want him to be happy.”

He just... isn’t sure this is the way for George to go about it. He explains this to Techno in great detail, telling him about all the dates George has been on so far and how bad they’ve all been. He has anecdotes, evidence. He explains what all of George’s dates have done wrong so far and then tells Techno about the list he has compiled of the things George likes. A list that apparently no guy on campus fits exactly.

He tells him about how the casual dates have turned into something else, with George now apparently making it his mission to make out with every guy on campus — which is fine! George can make out with whoever he likes!

“It’s just — I don’t think making out with random guys is going to find him the right person, you know?” he asks.

“Oh,” says Techno. “You’re still talking to me?”

“Yes I’m still talking to— Have you listened to *anything* I’ve been telling you for the past ten minutes?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Techno says dismissively, “You’re setting your best friend Greg—”

“—George—”

“—up on dates, the dates are awful, he’s discovered he’s got a sex drive and is collecting notches on his bedpost, you’re having conflicted feelings about it, you just want him to be *happy*... Am I getting the plot of this romance novel right?”

“*Techno*, what the hell?”

“No?”

“No!” Dream declares. His life is not the plot of a romance novel, *what the fuck*.

“Huh,” says Techno. He looks completely and utterly unmoved by the conversation.

Dream wants to wring his neck. He takes in a deep breath through his nose, exhales it slowly. “I’m just bothered that my friend is going to do something he regrets.”

“I don’t know, man,” says Techno. “Sounds like a you problem.”

Dream takes another shot of tequila.

He tries to put George out of his mind for the rest of the evening - even though he *promised* it would be a lads’ night - and rejoins Sappnap, Alex and Karl. They lose the next few hours to various drinking games, roping in several of their other friends in various combinations. It’s good, it’s fun, Dream swears his heart swells like three sizes (though he’d never admit it out loud, *what the hell*) and yet...

And *yet*...

He keeps thinking about George, keeps looking out for him when someone new comes into their room. Keeps listening for his voice and checking his phone to see if he’s text. He loves Sappnap, Alex and Karl but it’s just not the same, not without George there too.

Sappnap plies him with more beer, Karl curls around him and mollifies his need for touch, Alex challenges him and keeps his attention from slipping elsewhere, but Dream still can’t help but feel like something - *someone* - is missing.

At 2am, Sappnap attempts to throw a ball in one of the red cups in front of Dream and Alex and misses by about a mile when he looks up and sees someone over Dream’s shoulder.

Alex cheers and shit talks him and Dream throws a ball back at the cups down Sappnap and Karl’s end of the table whilst he’s distracted. It lands dead-centre in one and he grins before finally turning to see what distracted Sappnap.

Oh, indeed.

It’s George and his date. The blond guy he was making out with so passionately upstairs several hours ago. He is tall, but not as tall as Dream thought when he saw him leaning over George. He’s taller than George but not at Dream’s height. His blond hair is short, his eyes brown behind wire-rimmed glasses. His mouth is red and kiss-bitten.

Dream’s seen better.

He's not sure why he set George up with this guy. Had he really picked him on the app?

At his side, George is fluffy-haired and dark-eyed, teeth showing with his smile. He has one hand on the guy's arm to keep himself upright. He looks unsteady on his feet and Dream realises.

George is completely and utterly wasted.

"Dream!" says George, face lighting up.

The guy next to him looks up (and up, and up) to Dream.

"Oh," says Glasses, like it means something. "I see."

Dream ignores him, eyes on George.

"Hello," says Dream.

"Where have you *been*?" George asks. "I've been looking for you!"

When? Dream doesn't ask. *When you had your tongue down someone else's throat?* "Oh?" he says.

"Yeah," says George, attempting to look annoyed but looking far too cute where he sways on his feet, "You said — you *said*..." His mouth opens and closes as he tries to find the words.

Dream lifts an eyebrow.

"*Something*," George says, with emphasis.

Dream fights back the fond smile.

"Nice of you to finally stop sucking face and join us, *George*," Sapnap snipes. He's attempting to sound angry but he just sounds pouty. He hates being abandoned by George almost as much as Dream does.

George doesn't look away from Dream. "I was waiting for you."

"I've been here," Dream says, gesturing at the beer pong table, "All night."

George frowns at him. "That's — that's not..." He lets go of his date's arm finally and takes a few unsteady steps towards Dream.

Dream steps forward on instinct. Glasses reaches out too but Dream gets there first, looping his arm around George's waist. George leans into him instantly, smelling of alcohol and some other guy's cologne. Dream tries not to think about it.

"It's alright," Dream says over his head to Glasses, "I've got him."

"You're the worst," George mutters into his chest.

Glasses looks down at George then back up at Dream. An unreadable expression flickers over his face. "Right," he says. "I see."

Dream would totally flip him off if both his hands weren't focused on keeping George upright. Instead, he fixes his blandest smile to his face. "Bye."

Karl, Sapnap and Alex immediately join in, waving obnoxiously and cooing their goodbyes at

George's date. Alex blows a few kisses after him. George's date glares at them and then stomps out of the room as they all laugh.

"The worst," George mutters again, sounding like he thinks nothing of the sort.

Dream shifts his grip to get a better hold on George, head tucked under his chin and body curled up against his side. Karl shares a look with him over George's head, then tilts his chin in the direction of the backyard. Dream nods.

"Come on," he says, leading George out of the room.

"Nooo," says George, looking back, "I want to play beer pong with Sapnap."

"Later, babe," Sapnap promises.

"Nooo, Dream, make him stop," George says, which makes no sense at all. Despite his wish to play beer pong with Sapnap, he puts up no resistance to Dream tugging him out of the room. He just pouts up at him once they're in the hall and says, "Meanie."

"You are completely and utterly toasted," Dream replies, fond.

"Am not."

"Are to."

"Am not."

"Are to."

"Am not— where are you taking me?"

"Outside for some fresh air," Dream says, shifting his grip on George's waist to navigate him more easily through the crowded hallway to the back door. They pass by Sam, who raises his eyebrows at Dream in question, Dream shakes his head.

He gets George outside and onto the grass. George stumbles, nearly falling, then manages to right himself with a grip on Dream's shirt, which he keeps hold of even when he's straightened. He tilts his head back, eyes looking up into Dream's as Dream slides an arm around his waist to keep him upright. George's pupils are blown, lips slightly parted.

Is this what all his dates see? Dream wonders. Right before they kiss him.

His gaze falls lower, over the slope of George's nose, the scattering of his freckles.

He could kiss George right now, he realises.

It's a new thought, one that settles, calm, on his nerves. He thinks George would let him.

"I'm so tired," George whispers. He leans forwards, pressing his forehead to Dream's chest.

Dream lifts his free hand, runs his fingertips down George's spine, shoulder to waist. He meant to bring George out to get some fresh air to wake him up so that they could continue partying (making up for all the time lost whilst George was with his stupid date) but it doesn't look like that's going to happen.

George sighs out a soft breath. "Take me home."

Dream doesn't need to be asked twice.

He takes George back to his place, keeps him tucked into his side with one arm whilst he fiddles with George's keys with his other hand. Dream swears under his breath about how many fucking pointless keyrings he has and George laughs at him.

Once inside, he kicks the door shut behind them, manoeuvres them into George's bedroom, leaves George propped up against one wall as he searches his drawers for a shirt and shorts to sleep in. When he passes them both to George, George blinks up at him, dragging his bottom lip between his teeth.

He probably didn't think he'd be wearing clothes to bed tonight, a voice whispers in Dream's mind.

"I need you to change your clothes, George," Dream says gently, "Brush your teeth. You can do that for me, yeah?"

He knows it'd be easier to just push George into bed dressed as he is, but the clothes George is wearing right now smell like the cologne of that guy and something feral in Dream growls at the idea.

George nods and takes the clothes from him. Pliant, easy.

Dream heads to the kitchen as George gets changed. By the sink he pauses for a few minutes, hands curled around the edge of the counter, looking out of the window as he takes a moment to breathe. George. His date.

I was waiting for you.

Take me home.

He could have kissed George.

This whole night feels so surreal, from arriving at the party to seeing George with that guy, to his conversation with Techno, beer pong and then now. There's a warmth in his chest he doesn't remember, gently flickering flames.

He takes a few deep breaths, re-centres himself, heads back to George's room.

He knocks softly on the bedroom door before opening it. The lights are off when he steps back in, George standing in the middle of the room looking confused.

"I thought you'd left me," he says sounding so stupidly cute, Dream wants to *scream*.

He puts the glass of water down on the side and then puts his hands on George's shoulders, pushing him back towards the bed. George goes easily until he's sat down and then he tries to drag Dream with him. He's like a fucking *octopus*. It takes at least six tries before Dream can untangle himself to stand up again.

Finally, George lies down and rests his head on the pillow. Dream pulls the cover up to his chin.

"I really like you," George says, voice quiet and heavy with sleep.

"Yeah," says Dream, warm embers in his chest. "I like you too."

“I knew it,” says George, turning his face into his pillow.

Then, a few seconds later, so quiet it’s almost inaudible: “Remind me...” George trails off into a yawn.

When he doesn’t say anything more, Dream prompts, “Remind you...?”

But George is already gone, lost to sleep, leaving Dream waiting for an answer that doesn’t come.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

hi i'm back with another chapter, no longer on anon and we're now at 5 chapters instead of 4. enjoy?

When Dream arrives at the coffee shop the next day, Sapnap greets him with a wide grin that Dream is *immediately* suspicious of.

“Dream!”

Dream narrows his eyes. “Nick.”

Sapnap is unfazed. “Clay.”

Dream side-eyes him as he heads past him to drop his stuff off in the back. When he walks back onto the shop floor, Sapnap continues to smile at him.

“What?” Dream asks.

Sapnap's smile widens. “So,” he says. “How was last night?”

“The... party?” asks Dream.

“*Fuck* no. You and George.”

Dream blinks. “You mean taking him home?”

“Yeah!” Sapnap exclaims. He sidles closer to Dream, looking up at him with big, wide eyes. If he were a literal puppy, he'd be wagging his tail excitedly. “What happened?”

“I... took him home?”

As Dream says it, a few images come back to him: George in the garden of Sam's house, looking up at him with his lips slightly parted. The stars above them, the hard ground below. Dream's heart in his throat and the warmth of George in his arms.

Take me home.

He swallows.

“I thought... after the party...” Sapnap trails off.

Dream blinks, lost. “*What* after the party?”

“You took George home!” Sapnap exclaims. “He was... You were...”

Dream waits as Sapnap trails off into silence. They both stare at each other.

Dream gives him ten seconds, twenty. Finally the silence drags on too long. “We were *what?*” he

asks pointedly.

Sapnap makes a strangled sound at the back of his throat, a little bit like he's dying. He looks seconds away from throwing his hands up in the air. "I *can't* with you two."

"What does that even mean?"

Sapnap stares at him for a long minute. Then he turns and mutters something under his breath. It sounds a hell of a lot like *Jesus fucking Christ*.

"Listen, Dream." Sapnap's tone shifts. He puts his hands down on the counter, leans forwards. "Have any of George's dates been any good? Or — scrap that, has he gone on more than one date with anyone?"

Dream is thrown. "What? Uh..." He thinks hard. "Now that you mention it..." All of George's dates have been a one-date-only kind of thing. As far as Dream's aware, George hasn't liked anyone enough to go on a second date. "No."

"*Really*." Sapnap draws out the word, like it means something.

Expecting him to immediately jump on saying that George is a bad date, Dream defends, "It's the guys he's dating. They don't know what..."

"They're missing?" Sapnap suggests.

No, that's not right. "What they're doing?" Dream suggests, but that's not right either.

It's so *frustrating*. If Dream weren't so competitive, he would have given up weeks ago. He sighs out a long breath and lifts a hand to run it back through his hair, tugging on the strands. He has his mental list of everything George likes. He's swiped through so many profiles. He's sent so many messages. Yet no matter what he does, he can't seem to find the *one*.

"Maybe," says Sapnap, "They're just not right for him."

Dream tilts his head. "What do you mean?"

Sapnap grins, and there's a dangerous glint in his eyes. Dream is instantly wary; Sapnap is the only person Dream would consider possibly more competitive than he is. "I *said*, maybe you don't know what George wants at all."

Dream's hackles rise immediately. "I know George better than anyone."

"Mhmm," Sapnap says. "Sure."

"Shut *up*. I know George better than — than — better than *you*."

"Oh really?" Sapnap's grin is shit-eating. "If you know him so well, then why have his dates all been so bad? Why does he never go on a second date with them? Sounds like you don't know George at *all*."

Dream scowls. "And, what, you think you know him better than me?"

"Yeah! What if I do? I think I have a pretty good idea who — *what* George wants," Sapnap replies. "You're just so fucking obliivi — wait." He cuts himself off, eyes widening. "What if - no, shut up, hear me out - you let *me* choose the next one?"

“What?”

“Let me pick George’s next date.”

“Absolutely fucking not.”

“Why not?” Sapnap demands. “Seeing as you *clearly* keep picking the worst options.”

Dream glares at him. “I pick great dates for George.”

“False.”

“True.”

“False.”

“True.”

“False — Why do you even *care*?”

“Why do *you*?”

“Fine,” says Dream. “See if you can do any better than me.”

Sapnap’s grin is wolfish.

When George finally arrives at the coffee shop later that evening (two minutes before close, yawning into his closed fist, looking utterly unbothered that he slept through an entire day), Sapnap immediately steals his phone.

“Hey!” says George.

Sapnap ignores him, opening up the dating app. “Dream said I could borrow it.”

“Dream?” George asks, betrayed.

“What?” Dream looks up from his own phone.

It’s the first time Dream’s seen George since the party. He looks remarkably fresh-faced, considering the state he was in last night, wearing an oversized green hoodie Dream thinks is actually *his*, his hair soft and fluffy. When their eyes meet, George smiles at him and Dream’s heart does the weirdest fucking thing.

It skips a beat.

What the fuck.

“Dream,” George says again, pouting.

“Sapnap, give it back,” Dream says dutifully, on auto-pilot as his thoughts chant, *What the fuck, what the fuck, what the fuck.*

“No.” Sapnap is already scrolling through Dream’s carefully curated list of people on the app he thinks George should go on a date with. His nose is scrunched up in concentration.

“*Dream*,” George whines. He sits down on the other side of Dream in the booth and leans over him to try and grab his phone back from Sapnap. Sapnap holds it even further out of his reach, causing George to practically drape himself over Dream’s lap as he tries to reach past him.

“Give it back,” Dream says, half-hearted, still recovering from whatever the *fuck* that was.

His heart has betrayed him. It’s no longer working properly. Is this what death feels like? The arm he has on George’s side is being squashed uncomfortably into his chest, he moves it to rest on the back of the seat behind George instead. George leans even further against him, placing a hand on Dream’s thigh as he strains for Sapnap.

For a moment Dream forgets how to breathe.

“No,” Sapnap repeats. He’s grinning. “I’m getting you a *date*, George.”

“*Dream*,” George whines again, pouting now. He looks up at Dream, hand on his thigh, half in his lap. “Make him give it back.”

Dream is powerless to say no. His voice is hoarse when he turns to Sapnap and says, “Give it back.”

“Nope.”

“Sapnap.”

“Okay, fine.” Sapnap lets out a dramatic sigh. “I’ll give it back to George.” He holds the phone closer to George so he can almost touch it, “—*but*—” he jerks his hand back when George makes a swipe at it, “—only if you go on a date *I* set you up on.”

George tilts his head up to Dream, questioning. Dream meets his gaze.

His heart skips another fucking beat.

He remembers the feel of George in his arms, George looking up at him under the night sky. The way he’d come to his side so easily, how he’d held onto him the whole way back to his place.

The perfect height, a voice echoes in the back of his mind.

George tilts his head slightly to the side, a question.

Dream forces himself to shrug.

An unreadable expression flickers across George’s face. “Fine,” he says. He straightens slightly, pushing away from Dream, holding out his hand to Sapnap. “I’ll go on your stupid date. Can I have my phone back now?”

Sapnap hands it over with a smug look in Dream’s direction.

Dream rolls his eyes, but he’s unbothered, really. He very much doubts that Sapnap knows George better than him. Sapnap will likely choose the absolute worst match for George and it will end up being the most awful date George has ever had. Sapnap will find it hilarious, he and George will argue about it for a few days, they’ll eventually kiss and make up... Dream can write the script now.

George’s hand slid from his thigh after he got his phone back, Dream tries to ignore the fact his leg now feels cold. He and George have touched each other before, it’s nothing new. It’s just leftover

mixed signals and bad decisions from the night before, from being so close to George with his defences down, alcohol loosening his inhibitions, a warm body pressed against his.

Maybe he just needs to get laid.

That night, when they're leaving, George stalls, playing with the ends of his scarf. Dream had caught George looking at him a few times during the night, more so than usual.

Sapnap waits, clearly expecting Dream to walk home with him as he always does, George's place being in the opposite direction. Instead, Dream gestures with his hand for Sapnap to go on ahead. Sapnap raises his eyebrows, grin already starting to form as he very clearly considers ignoring Dream completely.

Dream narrows his eyes and jerks his head.

Sapnap rolls his eyes.

"Night, *idiots*," he says, insult lost in the fond edges of his tone.

Left alone for the first time since last night, Dream turns to look at George. He's stopped playing with the ends of his scarf now.

"So," says George. "Last night."

Dream grimaces. "Yeah."

"Sorry for being so wasted," George says.

"You really were." Dream knows he sounds stupidly fond. He *is* stupidly fond. Drunk George is something else entirely. "I'm not mad about it." His lack of sleep and raging hangover maybe, but neither of those things are George's fault.

There's a flicker of a smile across George's lips. He ducks his head. "Thanks for taking me home."

"No problem." Dream lifts a hand, scratching the side of his jaw. "Sorry I ruined your chances of going home with whatshisname."

"No you're not," says George.

"No, I'm not," Dream agrees. He fights back a smile.

George rolls his eyes with the exaggerated sigh he only gives when he thinks Dream's being particularly obnoxious. "You're such a dick, sometimes." He huffs out a laugh.

Dream crosses his arms, defensive. "He wasn't good enough for you."

"Oh, yeah?"

It's dangerously close to the conversation he had with Sapnap. "I know I picked him," he says, "But..."

"But...?"

Dream tries to drag forth a reason why he'd disliked Glasses so much the previous night, when

he'd matched all the criteria on Dream's list and he'd been pretty hot too. He thinks and he thinks and he thinks, but he can't find a reason for why he'd seen Glasses with George and his mind had just immediately gone *nope*.

His brows draw together. "He just wasn't right."

George's eyebrows rise. "Uh-huh."

He doesn't look too mad about it.

"Don't worry George, we'll find you the right guy one day." He steps forwards, slings his arm around George's shoulder to pull him in close. *Perfect height, perfect height, perfect height.*

"Sure." George doesn't pull away. He tilts his head back, leaning it on Dream's arm as he says, "I still can't believe you walked me home. Sam's house is so *far* from mine. You could have just put me in an Uber."

"And left you alone? Never."

George snorts.

"Anyway," says Dream, "I'd do it for anyone."

"Really?"

"Well, no," Dream admits. "But don't tell any of our friends that. You're special."

George's breath catches in the night air. "Yeah?"

Dream remembers cosying him into bed. How soft George looked in the darkness and golden-yellow lamplight. The tempting part to his lips.

I really like you.

He drops his arm.

George stumbles slightly at the abrupt movement and turns to look at him, confused. Dream turns his head away sharply, looking up at the night sky instead — anywhere but at George. He feels like he can't breathe suddenly, a strange, swooping feeling in his chest.

"Dream?"

Dream takes a breath, tries to centre himself again. Why is he suddenly *like* this? It's just George. Nothing has changed. George is his best friend, the guy he texts more than anyone else and who he looks forwards to seeing every day. He's the one he always gives the last piece of cake to and is the first person he thinks of when he wants to share something. *George.*

He exhales.

"I really need to get some sleep," he says. He forces his heart to slow down, his breathing to even out. "After dropping you off, I got back so late it was practically sunrise. I was so wasted last night, I barely even remember leaving the party with you." It's half-truth, half-lie, but he really doesn't want to talk about what he does remember: George looking up at him from his bed.

"Oh," says George. "Okay."

George takes a step back away from him, having regained his stability. He pushes his hands into the pocket of the hoodie that might actually be Dream's. "I guess we were both pretty out of it."

"Just a bit." Dream grins.

George's returned smile doesn't quite meet his eyes.

Dream uses his best reassuring tone, "I just need to go and sleep for, like, 24 hours." And remind his heart how to act around George. "I'll see you tomorrow in class, yeah?"

"Yeah," says George, "Sure."

Dream has the sudden urge to reach out for him. He fights it back, confused. George quirks an eyebrow at him and then turns to leave. As Dream watches him go, he feels like he's taken a misstep, and not just because his chest is feeling all tight. Something just doesn't feel *right*.

Two days later, George goes on the date Sapnap arranged for him.

Dream spends the whole day on edge, just *waiting* for the string of texts to tell him how terrible the date is. He spends most of his shift entertaining himself by thinking up awful places George's date might have taken him to, and horrendous pick-up lines he might be trying on him.

But, for the first time since this whole thing started, George doesn't immediately stop by the coffee shop after his date to tell Dream how bad it was. He doesn't even text him.

When Dream hasn't heard from him for almost a full day and it's officially time for the shop to close, he sends a casual text to George, *see you tonight?* meaning their usual evening chats over cake.

George doesn't reply.

Dream stares at the notification in the bottom of the screen telling him that his message was sent. It stays on *unread* all evening.

There's a funny feeling brewing in Dream's stomach.

It's weird, being in the cafe late at night without George hanging around, making a nuisance of himself, telling awful jokes and bickering with Sapnap. Helping himself to the cake on Dream's plate rather than the piece Dream has already given him.

Eventually, Sapnap heads off. He gives Dream a concerned look.

Dream waits. And waits and waits and waits. But George doesn't show.

* * *

Dream doesn't see George for the next few days. Sometime one evening he notices that his last message to George now shows as read, but George never sent a reply.

George hasn't completely disappeared off the face of the planet: he appears in a few of their mutual group chats, sending his usual one-liner replies and obnoxious gifs, but his direct messages with Dream remain cold. Dream sees him in class, but they're at a busy point in the term and George is stuck in a group with others for a project and they don't get a chance to talk.

When Karl and Alex come to the coffee shop just over a week later, laughing and joking but conspicuously missing George, Dream finally cracks.

“Where’s George?” he asks.

“He’s on a date!” Karl declares.

“Didn’t you know?” asks Alex, with a grin that Dream doesn’t like the look of *at all*. “I think it’s their third. He must really like this one.”

Dream accidentally knocks over the coffee he’s just finished, spilling it over the counter. He swears. When he grabs a rag to clean it up, he catches Karl’s eye. There’s a strangely concerned look in his eye.

“You set them up, right?” Karl asks.

Dream shakes his head. Assuming it’s the same one— “No. Sapnap did.”

Alex shrieks with laughter. “You let *Sapnap* pick a date for *George*?”

“Hey!” says Karl. “Sapnap’s very romantic!”

“How would *you* know?” Alex asks, pointed.

“Well, I, err—” as Karl blusters and blushes and digs himself into a hole, Dream tries to get used to the idea of George going on multiple dates with the same person. He can’t *quite* believe it, not after how badly all of his other dates have gone, but Alex and Karl have no reason to lie about it.

“I’m sure it’s fine,” Karl says a few minutes later, when Dream’s finished making their drinks. Karl’s expression is far too kind as he curls his hands around his mug. “It’s just a few dates.”

“Right,” says Dream.

“With a fucking incredibly hot blond,” Alex adds helpfully.

Karl frowns. “I thought you weren’t into—”

“I can appreciate when someone is *fine*.”

“What’s this? Alex on his superficial arc?” Karl asks, grinning. “Are you saying that George is only dating him for his *looks* ? Is that all that matters to you?”

“Fuck *off*!” Alex laughs, shoving at Karl’s shoulder.

A hot blond, Dream thinks, as they both head off to a table. Because George likes blonds, right. He turns and nearly knocks over another cup of coffee. “Mother *fu*—”

Later that evening, after he’s closed up the shop - and George still isn’t *here*, the *traitor* - Dream finds Sapnap sat at George’s usual table looking mopey, as he pushes a cake around his plate.

“Didn’t your parents ever teach you not to play with food?” Dream asks, sitting down next to him.

Sapnap glowers at him and purposefully takes a huge bite of the cake, chewing with his mouth open and getting crumbs everywhere.

“Disgusting,” Dream says, reaching over to attempt to shove his mouth closed, “Who *raised* you?”

“Your *mom*,” Sapnap says around a mouthful of cake, as he bats Dream’s hand away.

Dream rolls his eyes. “What’s *up* with you tonight?” Sapnap’s comebacks are usually better than this.

“Nothing,” Sapnap replies, chewing mulishly. Dream gives him a few seconds. Sapnap swallows, angrily cuts off another piece of cake. “I just— Have you seen George?”

Dream shakes his head, no.

“He’s not replying to my messages, I haven’t seen him in *days*. Man gets a boyfriend—”

Woah, thinks Dream, *when did anyone mention the word boyfriend?*

“—and he disappears from the face of the planet, like we don’t *matter*.”

Oh, thinks Dream. A few things slotting into place.

“Are you jealous?” he asks, gently teasing. “Are you *sad* that George is paying attention to someone other than us? Are you worried he’s not going to be our friend anymore?”

“That’s not — shut *up*!” Sapnap hisses, flustered and immediately losing his cool.

Dream grins. Of course Sapnap would be worried about George ditching them; as much as he acts like he thinks George is the worst person ever, Dream knows he cares about him just as much as he does.

“Is Sappy-nappy missing his Gogy Wo—”

“Shut *up*. Stop grinning. You—” Sapnap cuts himself off, glaring. He throws his shoulders back with a glint in his eyes that means trouble. “Right. You asked for this.”

Dream keeps grinning, knowing he’s hit a nerve. He doubts there’s anything Sapnap could do to *really* throw him.

“When you weren’t on shift yesterday, George brought his - his *date* with him. They sat at his usual table and shared some cake.”

“*What?*” Dream exclaims louder than he intended to. If there were people still in the cafe, they’d all be staring at him. He swallows and leans back in his chair.

“I dunno, it looked pretty serious, man.”

Sapnap’s head is bowed, he’s staring at his half-eaten cake. He’s taking the whole George for real thing *hard*.

George and his date, Dream thinks. In the coffee shop. Sharing cake.

There’s a hollow ache in his chest. No wonder George has been so quiet.

“Like, I knew it was gonna happen one day,” Sapnap’s saying, still not looking at him, “but I always figured, you know...” he trails off, suddenly awkward. Dream blinks at him. Sapnap clears his throat. “I thought, if it were... you know...” His gaze flicks up to Dream’s, then away.

“*Anyway*, I thought that, like, nothing would change. We’d still all just hang out, the three of us.

But now he's with Cliff—"

Cliff, thinks Dream, *what a dumb fucking name*.

"It's like he doesn't love us anymore!"

Dream raises his eyebrows as Sapnap slumps back in his seat, arms crossed and grumpy.

"This wasn't what I thought would happen," Sapnap gripes, "When I said I wanted to set him up."

"You didn't think... you'd actually set him up?" Dream asks, eyebrows raised.

"No! I thought if I picked someone like — someone like, well..." Sapnap coughs, again not looking at him. "It doesn't matter." He straightens. "I just — I figured it would be awful, because his date wouldn't actually be, *you* know, and then George would realise, or you — I didn't think George would *actually like him!*"

Dream hums in acknowledgement.

"You're being oddly calm about this," Sapnap says.

The fingers of Dream's left hand are tapping restlessly on his thigh under the table. "Shouldn't I be?"

On edge, Dream thinks. *I'm on edge*. It's like his whole body is a live wire, coiled tight and tense. Alex and Karl talking about George's date was one thing, but knowing that George brought him here... to the coffee shop...

"Don't you care?" Sapnap asks, "That George is dating someone?"

Dream doesn't reply, and Sapnap's hand comes down over his, gripping tight. "*Dream*."

"I'm fine," Dream says, shaking his hand off. Sapnap holds firm, refusing to let go. Dream grits his teeth and looks him in the eye. Under the table, his restless tapping is getting out of control. "*I'm fine.*"

Sapnap glares at him.

Dream glares back.

"Fine," says Sapnap.

"*Fine*," Dream replies.

He is just *fine*. George has found a guy he actually likes. Dream doesn't have to spend all his time trying to get him a date now. He can go back to whatever it was he used to do before his whole life was consumed by finding the perfect date for George.

Sapnap won their little competition but, like, it's fine. Whatever.

Dream's just annoyed that he lost. Nothing more.

Everything is *fine*.

Then he meets Cliff in person.

Three days after Alex and Karl announced George was going on multiple dates and Sapnap had his little mope about it, George brings his date to the coffee shop when Dream's on shift.

George waves at Dream, then pulls his date by the hand to his usual table.

George's date is tall, blond, and has green eyes.

Dream hates — *dislikes* him on sight.

"You alright, dude?" Punz asks, eyeing him warily.

Dream draws himself back to what he's doing, realises he's been aggressively grinding the same coffee beans for the last five minutes instead of actually making coffee with them. He shakes himself, bins the beans and starts again. "I'm fine."

George laughs from across the room. His date reaches out and brushes his hair out of his eyes. Dream feels like he wants to *break things*.

"Hey," Cliff says, when he comes up to the counter to order. Dream normally just makes George drinks on the regular whilst he works, doesn't even wait for George to come over and say he needs a new one. He's pretty sure he's never once even charged George for them.

He charges Cliff.

Standing eye-to-eye on either side of the counter, Dream realises Cliff is *exactly* the same height as him.

This makes him irrationally irritated.

Cliff makes small talk with him whilst he waits for their drinks to be made. He even shares a joke with Punz. He seems genuinely nice, is actually kind of funny, doesn't seem pretentious or stuck-up or like any of the other bad dates Dream set George up with before. He says thank you for their drinks, leaves a tip in the glass jar they have and says he hopes he has a good day.

Cliff is perfect.

Cliff is the *worst*.

"Cliff," announces Tommy, when he enters the shop a few minutes later, "is probably the greatest guy I've ever met."

"Fuck *off*, Tommy!" Dream snaps, and resists the urge to throttle him.

When Dream started this whole thing, he'd done it with good intentions. He just wanted to *help*. He wanted to help his best friend get laid.

He didn't expect his best friend to *ditch* him completely.

"George," Dream whines down the phone. "Come on."

George laughs. He's out somewhere; Dream can hear wind and trees rustling behind him. In contrast, Dream's in his room, lying back on his bed, staring at the ceiling and wishing he was

anywhere else.

Dream misses him, he hates it. He ripped into Sapnap so hard when he said he was missing George but how Sapnap acted is nothing compared with how Dream feels inside. Whenever he thinks about George now it *hurts*.

“I can’t,” George says. “I’m busy.”

Dream can *feel* himself starting to pout. “You’re *always* busy. You never have time for me anymore.”

“I reply to your texts,” George says. “I call you.”

“Yeah, like three hours afterwards,” Dream moans.

There is no relief whatsoever for Dream. Every single fucking thing he sees makes him think of George. Everything he wants to say, he wants to say it to George. Every night at the coffee shop when the door opens, he wants it to be George.

And when he does get to spend time with George, when George isn’t on one of his stupid dates with Cliff, George spends most of his time on the phone or every conversation is “Cliff this” and “Cliff that” and Dream wants to *scream*.

“I’m busy, Dream,” George says, laughing softly. He sounds amused, like Dream’s suffering is just *funny* to him. “I can’t.”

There was a time, Dream thinks, when he would have been George’s first choice. Fucking Cliff — fucking *Sapnap*, setting them up. *I really like you*, George had said, that night after Sam’s party. Well that was a fucking lie.

Dream’s heart has mostly stopped doing that strange swooping thing whenever he thinks of George, but it still twists whenever he sees him in person, skipping a beat. It’s the rarity of seeing George; it’s such an event for him now he has a physical reaction to it. His breath hitches, his words get stuck in his throat.

Over the phone it’s a bit easier to breathe, but then—

“What?” says George, his voice becoming muffled as he pulls the phone away to speak to someone, “Oh, it’s Dream. Yeah. No. Okay.” A soft laugh. His voice gets clearer as he puts the phone back again, “I’ve got to go. We’ve got plans.”

“Right,” says Dream. “Of course.”

“Speak to you later,” says George, and hangs up before Dream has a chance to reply.

“No you won’t,” Dream says to the blank screen of his phone. He throws it onto the mattress, then turns and buries his face in his pillow and screams.

At the end of the month, Sam throws another one of his parties and George spends the entire evening glued to his date’s side. This time, he doesn’t get distracted as soon as Dream turns up, instead George smiles at him from across the room and stays tucked under Cliff’s arm.

(*Perfect height*, that stupid, irritating, annoying voice says again in Dream’s mind.)

“Hey,” says Sam, pressing a beer into his hand. “What is up with you? You’ve been distracted all night.”

“I’m *fine*,” says Dream, clenching the can hard enough it dents.

There’s an ache in his chest like a bruise and Dream can’t stop pressing it every time he looks over at George and Cliff. Cliff and George. Dream wants to *scream*.

He needs a drink. He needs several drinks. He needs every drink in the house.

In the kitchen, he runs into Techno again.

“We really need to stop meeting like this,” Dream says, helping himself to the bottle of tequila Techno has once again helpfully liberated from the locked cupboard.

“Who are you?” asks Techno.

Dream stares at him, and there must be something a little wild in his eyes, because Techno laughs and holds up his hands. “Kidding,” says Techno, “Just kidding.”

Dream glares at him and takes a swig straight from the bottle. It burns, nice. A distraction. He thinks he can get plenty wasted on this. He turns to head back out of the kitchen and freezes, when he catches sight through the doorway of the hallway beyond. There’s a couple of different people hanging out there, a quieter space than the rooms where music is thumping.

George is there with Cliff.

They’re kissing.

George looks so small next to Cliff (the same height as him, Dream thinks again, irritated). He has one hand in Cliff’s hair, tugging on the blond strands. The other is gripping tight to his shirt. Dream thinks he’s the type to leave bruises.

“Oh,” says Techno, coming up beside him, “That your boy?”

“He’s not...” Dream takes in a breath through his nose. “Yeah, that’s George.”

“Huh,” says Techno. “He looks like a discount you.” He nods his head at the guy George is kissing.

He—

Dream looks at Cliff. Looks again.

Then he puts the bottle of tequila in his off-hand, gets out his phone and opens up Instagram. He starts scrolling. He finds Cliff’s social media easily enough via George and some of his other friends who have also added him - traitors, all of them - and starts hunting through everything he finds.

Cliff is blond. Cliff is tall. Cliff has green eyes.

He is easy to talk to. He has great friends. He plays video games and from what Dream can tell, he’s competitive but not a dick about it. He knows where to get good coffee (he took George to *their* coffee shop) and he’s not an English Major.

He meets every bullet point on Dream’s mental list.

A mental list that, Dream now realises, he also meets.

Oh.

“*Oh*,” says Dream.

“...Did you just have a real life ‘oh’ moment?” Techno asks, sounding a second away from laughter. “Cringe.”

Dream manages to make it all the way back to his place, unlock the front door, stumble to his room, slam the door behind him and lean back on it before he takes his phone out again with trembling fingers.

It rings three times before it’s picked up.

“Hullo?”

“Sapnap,” he says into the phone desperately, “Sapnap *help*.”

“Dream? What — fuck, what time is it?”

“*Sapnap*,” he says again. He’s holding his phone so tight his knuckles have gone white. “I’m in love.”

“Holy *fuck*, it’s three in the morn— *what*?”

Dream takes a breath. Exhales the truth: “I’m in love with George.”

Silence.

He can’t even hear Sapnap breathing on the other end of the phone. Dream feels the rising panic, his chest going tight. “Nick?” He tries again. His voice comes out quiet.

“Yeah— yeah, I’m here. Fuck.” There’s rustling on the other end of the phone line as Sapnap shifts around, presumably in bed. “Can you say that again?”

“I’m,” Dream clears his throat, it’s dry. “I’m in love with George.”

Sapnap hangs up on him.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Dream stares at the phone in his hand.

Then he hits redial.

“You *dick*—”

“Jesus Christ.”

“Don’t hang up on me again.”

“Alright, okay, fuck, right.” Sapnap sounds a bit more awake now but his voice is gravelly. “So you’re in love with George.”

“Yes,” Dream hisses into his phone.

He thinks of George kissing Cliff at the party and he wants to *die*.

“Make it *stop*.”

“Do you really want that?” Sapnap asks, dubious.

Dream bites back his instinctive reaction and considers his feelings for George. Would he be happy with them disappearing? With going back to how things were before? To just spending time together in the cafe and sharing cake and making him latte art...

Wait.

“I don’t think I ever started,” Dream says.

“...What?”

“No — I mean, I think this is how it’s always been, between us. I just didn’t realise. Shit, Sapnap, have I been in love with George all this time?”

“I don’t know, man. Only you know how you feel. But if you want my honest opinion?” Sapnap asks. “Yeah, yeah you have.”

“*Fuck*.”

Sapnap hums in agreement. There’s a few moments of silence as he shifts in his bed and Dream considers the fact his whole world just fell down around him.

“Sapnap,” he says. He knows he sounds weak but he can’t help it. “Help.”

“Fuck, okay,” says Sapnap. “So, you’re in love with George—” Dream’s stomach plunges again. He wonders if it will ever stop doing that when someone mentions George, “—but he’s seeing someone else — but that’s fine! We can work with that. It’s just Cliff. Cliff sucks.” That’s not what all of Dream’s friends have been saying every day for the last *week*. “How about we just don’t mention your feelings to George yet?”

Dream grips the phone tighter. “What?” he asks, hoarse.

“I *think* it’s kind of a dick move if you drop this on him out of nowhere tonight. He’s — he’s, fuck, well, he’s probably with Cliff right now.”

“*Stop saying his name.*”

“Okay fine, whatever, he’s with *dumbfuck* right now and you can’t — you can’t do anything about that right now. You need to sober up. I need to sleep. We *both* need to sleep. Then we’ll revisit this after work tomorrow, yes?”

Dream is silent, weighing the pros and cons of ringing George right now to tell him that he’s apparently in love with him and has been for a long time. It has a certain kind of appeal to it, like pressing a bruise or walking into fire.

“*Dream.*” Sapnap’s voice is firm. “We are going to deal with this *tomorrow.*”

“I *guess*,” Dream says, reluctantly.

“Glad we’re on the same page. Now fucking drink some water and get into bed you idiot. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Dream mutters his agreement, feeling like a petulant child. He knows Sapnap is right, knows that going to bed is the best thing he can do right now, he just hates the idea of doing it alone with the realisation he’s just had.

“Oh and Dream,” Sapnap adds, right as Dream is about to cancel the call. “We hit the three month mark yesterday. Allow me to say: *I told you so.*”

Sapnap hangs up.

Dream spends the next day in a daze. He wakes up, thinks about George, showers, thinks about George, goes to class, doodles hearts in the margin of his notebook—

(“What the fuck?” hisses a wide-eyed Punz, sitting next to him.

Dream slams his notebook closed.)

—has lunch, thinks about George, goes to class...

His shift at the coffee shop is the only time he doesn’t think about George, and that’s only because it’s a busy shift, and he kind of needs to be fully focused to not pour burning hot coffee over himself.

At around 8pm the rush eases off. Dream thinks about late night coffee and cake with George.

Sapnap turns, takes one look at him, and says, “Alright, hit me.”

“I’m so fucking in love, Sapnap.” Dream slumps back against the counter, placing his hands over his face.

“Yeah,” says Sapnap. “No shit.”

“Do you think anyone else knows?”

When Sapnap doesn't immediately respond, Dream spreads his fingers apart so he can peer between them.

"Well, yeah," says Sapnap, like it's the dumbest question Dream's ever asked him.

"Oh my god, do you think *George* knows?"

Maybe Dream can get a transfer, go to another university. Get as far away from George as is humanly possible. Go to another country. Another world, maybe. The moon.

His phone vibrates in his pocket.

Dream pulls it out to see a Snapchat from George.

He opens it immediately.

George is in the library. He's wearing an oversized hoodie, his hair is mussed, he looks like he's had about two hours sleep and he's pouting. *I'm bored*, the message says.

George looks like he just rolled out of bed and was then promptly pulled through a hedge backwards.

Dream wants to climb him like a fucking tree.

Oh my god, he thinks, horrified at his own biology.

A cough from opposite him reminds him that he's not alone. Dream takes a quick snap of a mug on the side and sends back *Hi bored, I'm coffee*, then turns his screen off and looks up.

Sapnap's face is scrunched up. He looks a little like he's going to puke. "Are you messaging him right now?"

"No," Dream lies.

You're such an idiot, George replies, with another selfie. This time he's got his elbow on the table, head propped up with one hand buried in his hair.

Dream wants to sink his hands into George's hair. Wants to tighten his grip and see George—

"Oh my god!" Sapnap yells, horrified, "You *are* ! Stop it!"

"I'm not!"

"You are — your face keeps doing that, that *thing* — stop it!"

"I'm not doing anything!"

Sapnap takes out his own phone, muttering. "I'm not fucking qualified to deal with this."

Ignoring him, Dream looks down at his own smile. With a fond smile, he taps out his response. *You're the idiot who's studying last-minute because he forgot he had a deadline tomorrow.*

Lies and slander, says George. *Can I have your notes?*

Fine, replies Dream, opening up his email and forwarding them to George instantly, *but only because I love you.*

A second after he hits send he realises what he wrote. He throws his phone down on the counter as if it burns. Fuck. *Fuck!*

Sapnap's staring at him.

"I'm fine," Dream says preemptively.

"Sure, Jan," Sapnap replies.

"What were we talking about?" Dream asks to divert him, and then remembers, oh right. George.

He closes his eyes for a moment at his own stupidity and takes a deep breath.

When he exhales and opens his eyes, Sapnap is staring at him. "This is wild," he says. "I've never seen you like this."

"Like what?"

"Nervous. Unsure."

"I'm—" Dream cuts himself off. There's not really any use denying it, is there? He is really fucking all over the place. Because of George.

"Yeah," he says, "I am."

He expects Sapnap to immediately lay into him and prepares himself for the onslaught of roasting.

Instead, Sapnap says, gentle and cautious, "So, what are we gonna do?"

Thrown by Sapnap's unexpected sincerity, Dream takes a moment to honestly consider it and is left with, "I don't know."

If George was single, Dream would think about trying something. Maybe. There's their whole friendship to consider, afterall, never mind if there's a chance that George even feels the same way.

But that *maybe* doesn't matter, because George is seeing Cliff.

"Do you want me to kill Cliff?" asks Sapnap.

Dream nearly chokes. "*What?* Sapnap!"

"Dude, I'd do it for you."

The bell above the door to the shop rings.

"Seriously," Sapnap says, "I reckon I could take him."

"No I do not want you to kill him, Jesus Christ," Dream says. He can't believe he has to actually say this.

"Are you sure?" Sapnap asks.

"*Yes* I'm sure."

"Fine. But we gotta find some way to get rid of him though, break him and George up. Not that I'm even sure they're an official thing. I mean, do people even label that shit these days?"

“I don’t know,” says Dream, thinking about George calling Cliff his boyfriend and being filled with incandescent rage.

“The cavalry has arrived!” a voice declares, and Dream looks over to see Karl and Alex stood by the counter.

“What’s up, kings?” Alex asks. He’s got his hands in his pockets, looking relaxed, ever-present beanie pulled down over his hair. His eyes are focused on Dream.

“We’re trying to figure out how to break up George and Cliff,” Sapnap says with no hesitation whatsoever.

“What the *fuck*,” hisses Dream, leaning over to punch him in then shoulder right as Karl says, “Oh thank God.”

Dream freezes with his hand inches from Sapnap’s shoulder. “What?”

“We’ve been saying the exact same thing,” Karl continues, oblivious to Dream’s wide-eyed stare. “Like, he’s so annoying, right? He’s not right for George at *all*, with his stupid blond hair and his big green eyes.”

“Never liked that guy,” Alex agrees, the fucking liar. Dream’s mouth drops open.

“Constantly stealing Gogy from us.” Karl nods.

“He’s always gatekeeping George,” Alex says, “Forever showing up when he’s not invited and stealing him from us, monopolising his attention, getting pouty when George wants to be with us.”

Dream startles back into life. “You always used to yell at *me* for that!”

“Yeah, but we like you,” Alex says, dismissive, and Dream is simultaneously both pissed off and flattered.

“Right,” says Karl. “So what’s the plan, boys?”

“I suggested murder,” Sapnap says, “But *Dream* said no.”

“We are not *murdering anyone*,” Dream hisses.

“Aw, man,” says Karl.

“We just need to get George to realise how dumb Clifford is,” Alex says, like it really is just that easy.

“Clifford?” Dream asks.

“He hates when I call him that,” Alex says with a grin. “Apparently it’s not his name.” He shrugs.

“Who calls their kid Cliff anyway?” Karl asks. “He’s got nothing on you.” He flashes Dream a winning smile.

Wait. “You know?” Dream demands.

“That you’re utterly head-over-heels in love with George?” Karl asks. “Yeah. Didn’t you?”

“It was pretty fucking obvious,” Alex adds.

They're taking this remarkably well, Dream thinks. They don't seem thrown at all by his loving-George revelation. Dream thought there would be more shock, some confusion. Did *everyone* figure this out before him?

As Sapnap, Alex and Kal start throwing ideas back and forth for how to get George and Clifford - fuck, *Cliff*, now Dream is doing it too - to break up, Dream leans back against the counter and listens, tapping his fingers restlessly on his thigh.

His attention wanders to his phone, but there's no way he's replying to that text from George.

George is probably messaging Cliff now anyway, or spending actual time with him. After all, George really *does* seem to like...

"Wait," says Dream.

Karl pauses in the middle of his elaborate plan involving the university's dance crew, an airplane message and, of all things, a clown.

Dream takes a breath. "We can't... we can't break them up."

A pause; then pandemonium.

Sapnap, Karl and Alex all yell over each other, at each other, and at Dream. Dream lets them rant for a few minutes before holding up his hands.

"George likes Clifford—*fuck*, Cliff. He *likes* him," Dream reminds them. "We can't break that up. Even if — even if I have these feelings—" God this is so fucking cringe can a hole just open up and swallow him whole already —"I'm not going to break them up. They're happy. George is happy. Isn't that good?"

His friends stare at him.

"I just want George to be happy," Dream says, quiet.

"Holy fuck," says Alex, eyes wide.

"*Dream*," Karl says, voice filled with softness.

Dream looks down at the counter, rather than at his friends. This is what love is, right? Wanting the best for someone else even if you're not what they want. Love is putting other people first. Love is doing the right thing and letting go, even if it hurts, because it's what's best for the other person. Love is—

"No," Sapnap says. Then, louder, "No, *fuck* that! You're giving up? Just like that?"

Dream's head snaps up.

"You," says Sapnap, "*You* are giving up?"

Sapnap's furious, in a way he so rarely ever is. He points at Dream's chest angrily.

"*You* once made restocking the cake cabinet a competition! *You* keep a track of how many drinks *everyone* makes on shift just so you can make one more than everyone else. And don't even get me *started* on that whole thing with Techno—"

Dream squawks in indignation. Karl lets out a nervous bubble of laughter.

“And then George starts seeing some guy and you’re like *nope! Guess I can’t compete with that!* No, fuck you.” Sapnap glares at him.

“Sapnap,” Dream pleads, “He’s already with someone—“

“So that’s it?” Sapnap demands. “You’re just giving up on George, without even trying?”

Dream opens his mouth to protest, then closes it again.

“Does *George* mean that little to you?” Sapnap demands.

“Of course—” Dream cuts himself off, glaring at Sapnap. “Why are you getting so mad? This is *your* fault.”

“My fault?” Sapnap demands. “How are your messed-up, backwards feelings *my* fault?”

“You’re the one who set them up! You put George on that date!”

“With *you!*”

“...*What?*”

Sapnap points at him. “I set George up on a date with *you* ! Cliff’s blond! He’s tall! He’s got green eyes! He likes video games, he’s a nerd! You think all of these things are just a coincidence? I made a list of all the things George likes about you and then found them in one person and *look!* It worked! George likes him!”

“See?!” Dream demands, reeling from the onslaught of information. “*Your* fault!”

“I didn’t know he was going to actually *like* him!” Sapnap protests. “I didn’t think they were going to *date*.”

Dream stares at him. “What did you *think* was going to happen?”

“I thought George would realise how much he likes *you* and *you* would realise how much you like *him* and then you would get together and adopt, like, twelve kids and get a house with a white picket fence and a golden retriever puppy or something *I don’t fucking know!*”

Dream blinks. He takes a moment to consider Sapnap’s words. “Did you just say... Do you think George *likes* me?”

“*Jesus fucking Christ,*” says Alex.

Sapnap throws his arms up into the air. “I hate you both. You deserve each other.”

“No, Sapnap, wait—” Dream scrambles to get his thoughts together. He’d thought the whole thing with Cliff, his whole realisation, was just on *his* end, that Cliff being - what had Techno said, a discount version of Dream? - was just relevant to *him*.

He hadn’t even *considered* that it might mean that George might... that George might...

“That’s it,” says Sapnap, reaching for his phone. “I’m telling George.”

Dream launches himself at him. “Don’t you fucking dare!”

“Just *tell him*, you idiot.”

“No!”

They end up in a weird sort of stand-off, with Dream’s hand around Sapnap’s wrist and Sapnap’s hand wrapped around his, neither of them able to do anything with their own phones, both glaring at each other. On the other side of the counter, Karl and Alex are just *standing* there, watching them.

“Dream,” Sapnap says. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

“He hates me,” Dream replies instantly. “We’re not friends any more. It makes things weird.”

“You’re weird anyway,” Alex says. Karl shushes him.

“I’m not — I don’t want to — I can get over this.” Dream takes a breath, tries to convince Sapnap by controlling his voice and not letting it waver. “I should get over George. That’s what’s best.”

“Dream.” Sapnap sounds soft, concerned.

Dream tries to pull his hand out of his grip but Sapnap holds firm.

“Is it really that hard for you to think you might have a chance? That George might like you back?”

There he goes again, trying to get Dream’s hopes up. Making him think that George might actually... that George...

“*Dream*,” says Sapnap. “You gotta trust me on this. Take the chance.”

Dream’s mind flits back, lands on the words he’d said to George at the start of all this, right back when he was setting him up on those first dates.

You miss all of the shots you don’t take.

“And if it fails?” Dream asks, hating how vulnerable he sounds.

“You are not giving George enough credit here,” Sapnap says. “You think he’s gonna stick with some discount version of you when he could have the real thing?”

Sapnap scoffs and crosses his arms over his chest. “George has *taste*, man.” He turns sharply to look at Alex and Karl. “Don’t tell him I said that.”

Alex makes the sign of the cross, Karl grins in a way that inspires no belief whatsoever.

“Yeah,” says Alex, “Now shut up and let’s start planning.”

Alex and Karl relocate to George’s usual table in the corner. They set it up as an ‘emergency planning bunker’, which makes no sense whatsoever but it makes them both happy, and spend the next few hours throwing around increasingly terrible ideas for how to get George to break up with Cliff.

When George finally arrives at the coffee shop later that night, Sapnap has suggested murder no less than fifteen times, Karl is convinced they can find a way to memory-wipe George, and Alex has laughed so hard he’s cried. Twice.

George’s hair is all wind-blown from being outside, tousled and stupidly-attractive. He’s got a

thick scarf wrapped around his neck to keep warm and his cheeks and the tip of his nose are tinged pink from the cold.

He looks so fucking *adorable* Dream forgets words.

“I see what you mean about the face thing,” Alex stage-whispers to Sapnap.

Dream doesn’t even try and hit him, just watches as George walks over to the counter. This is the first time he’s seen him in person since his revelation, since last night at Sam’s stupid party when George had been with Cliff and Dream had wanted to break *everything*.

“Now’s your chance,” Karl hisses, elbowing at Dream’s side. “Tell him how you feel!”

“What? No!”

“Go go go go!”

Dream is practically shoved out of the booth.

He stumbles and George looks up. When he sees Dream, his eyes light up and he smiles.

Dream takes a moment to remind himself how to breathe. Then he runs a hand back through his hair, takes a breath to ground himself, and walks over to the counter to serve him. When he steps up behind it, George smiles at him again.

Dream promptly forgets how to speak. “Hey. Hi, hello. Hey.”

George looks faintly amused. “Hello.”

Dream is a regular, normal, functioning human being. “What can I get you?”

“You don’t remember my drink order?”

“What— no, of course I do!” Dream fumbles, almost knocking over a nearby stack of mugs. “I remember everything—” *about you*. He cuts himself off just in time.

George gives him the strangest look.

“Right,” Dream says and grabs one of the mugs. Carefully. Without toppling the tower. He can *feel* Alex, Karl and Sapnap watching him from the other side of the room. He wants new friends. They’re the worst. His life is the worst. He hates everything.

“Because you love me,” George says, and Dream drops the mug.

“Fuck!” Somehow he manages to catch it before it shatters on the floor. When he stands again, cradling the mug in both hands, it’s to stare at George with wide eyes. Dream’s cheeks feel warm. He’s likely just as pink as George but without the wind to blame.

George tilts his head to the side, one eyebrow quirked.

It’s nothing new between them. Dream has teased George about this so many times before. It’s just friendly banter. Just words between friends.

“Yes,” Dream mutters, not looking at him. “That.”

You like me, he thinks. *That’s what Sapnap said*. Dream glances up from under his eyelashes as he

starts to work on George's drink. George is watching him, but his expression is the same as it's always been, there's nothing different when he looks at Dream. Sure, he looks fond, but George always looks fond when he looks at him, even when he's exasperated.

Sapnap has to have got it wrong. The fact Cliff is just like Dream is just a coincidence.

"What?" asks George, catching him looking.

"What?"

"You're staring."

"No I'm not."

"Yes you are." George narrows his eyes at him. "You're being weird."

"*You're* being weird."

"You're—" George's phone pings in his hand. He glances down. "Oh, it's Cliff."

Ignore him, Dream thinks. *Ignore him ignore him ignore him.*

George swipes the message away, turning his screen off.

Dream ducks his head to hide his smile as he continues to make George's drink. It feels like a victory — a little one, but it's *something*. He tries to calm the violent impulse in him that wants to punch the air.

"Are you closing the shop tonight?" George asks.

"Why?" asks Dream. "Are you angling for some free cake?"

"People pay for cake?" George blinks at him, wide-eyed and innocent.

Dream snorts and shakes his head, amused despite himself. "Yeah, imagine not having pretty privilege everywhere you go."

"You think I'm pretty?"

Fuck. Dream turns his head so George can't see his expression, and mutters, "I have *eyes*."

George makes a considering noise in the back of his throat but doesn't push him on it.

What Dream really wants to do is yell about how pretty George is, tell him that he's the best looking guy in this coffee shop by a country mile, shout it from the rooftops if he has to, but he has to bite down on his tongue to hold it back. He's always been open with his affection and now that he's realised how much he likes George...

If George were his, if they *were* together, there would be no shutting Dream up.

The phone in George's hand sounds with another message. They both glance down at the screen. It's from Cliff.

"Shouldn't you be spending every free moment you have with him?" Dream asks, unable to help himself. "Isn't that what you do now?" It comes out way more bitter than he intended, somehow slipping right past a friendly dig into genuine hurt.

“Haven’t had a better offer,” George replies.

Dream takes in a sharp breath.

He tears his gaze away and focuses instead on finishing off George’s drink. “Here.”

George takes the mug, but his hand lingers. Their fingers are brushing.

Neither of them move.

“You sound jealous.”

Dream stubbornly tilts his chin up. “What if I am?”

George’s fingertips are warm points on his skin. The touch feels deliberate. *Sapnap said*, that voice comes back into Dream’s mind, as his heart clenches in his chest.

George’s voice is low when he says, “All you have to do, Dream, is ask.”

A spark shoots through Dream’s veins, sudden hope. It can’t be, there’s no way. George just means spending time with him as a friend, he doesn’t mean... he doesn’t...

“Wait,” George interrupts his thoughts, looking down at his mug, “No latte art?”

Dream is snapped out of his feelings, brought back abruptly from his crisis to the reality of this absolute idiot in front of him. He rolls his eyes. “You’re such a brat.”

“I’m pretty, remember?” George replies, “I always get what I want.”

“Not from me.”

“No,” George agrees, and there’s something in his tone, something Dream can’t quite place. “Not from you.”

George finally pulls the mug away, out of Dream’s grasp. As he does, he glances down at his phone in his other hand and the messages from Cliff. “I should probably get this to go. Can you change it for me?”

Anything for you, Dream thinks, and hates himself a little bit. God. Sapnap would never let him hear the end of it if he’d said that aloud. He busies himself with moving George’s drink into a take-out cup instead, trying not to be too bitter about the fact he’s doing it so George can go and see *Cliff*.

When he’s done, he hands it back. This time, George takes it and their fingers don’t brush.

Dream forces his voice to level. He feels a little like he’s just run a marathon. “Bye, George.”

“Bye, Dream.”

Dream watches George until he’s left the coffee shop, the door swinging shut behind him, then heads straight for the table filled with his friends. He slumps down onto the seat next to Karl and opposite Sapnap and Alex.

“How’s that giving up on George thing going?” Alex asks.

Dream groans and falls forwards, resting his forehead on the table, “Just leave me here to *die*.”

After a moment, he feels a hand in his hair, Karl petting him gently.

“It’s okay,” Karl says softly, as Alex whispers, “Simp.”

Dream can’t even deny it.

Despite spending the rest of the evening with Karl, Alex and Sapnap, Dream comes to no greater conclusions about what to do. If anything, he leaves the shop feeling even more frustrated, because now his secret’s out and yet it hasn’t changed anything.

George is still dating Clifford — *Cliff*, and Dream is going to be alone. Forever.

At a loss, Dream decides to talk to Wilbur. Wilbur seems like a guy who knows a lot about romance. He’s got that whole starving artist vibe, pouring all his heartbreak into his songs.

“How do you tell someone you’re in love with them without telling them you’re in love with them?” Dream asks, the next time Wilbur comes into the shop.

“Oh, you talking about George?” Wilbur asks, like it’s that fucking obvious.

“What? No! Why— fine, yes. I’m in love with George.”

“Mm,” Wilbur agrees, like the realisation hasn’t totally shattered Dream’s world. “Oh, sorry, was I not meant to know?” he asks, when he notices Dream’s stare. “Sorry, let me try that again: wow, you’re in love with George?”

“...I hate you,” Dream decides, there and then. Wilbur is the absolute worst. No wonder he gets on so well with Tommy. They’re both as bad as each other. “Is it really that obvious?”

“I mean, yeah.”

Did *all* of their friends know before him? Has everyone just known he’s in love with George this whole time and not bothered to tell him? Is this a whole *thing*? He stares down into the depths of the black coffee he’s currently making for Wilbur and wonders if it’s too late to transfer to another university.

“Chin up, mate,” Wilbur says. “It’s just love.”

Just love.

Just love.

Like every time Dream sees George his heart doesn’t skip in his chest. Like just thinking about him doesn’t make him feel funny inside. Like he isn’t the first thing he thinks about when he wakes up in the morning and the last thing he thinks about before goes to *sleep*.

“So, like, what do I do?” Dream asks.

“You’re asking me?” Wilbur laughs — and then *keeps* laughing — and then laughs so hard he actually looks like he’s about to cry. “What the hell, man.”

Dream stares at him.

Wilbur catches the way he’s looking at him. “You— you’re actually serious?” He wipes at his

eyes with his shirt cuff. “You’re really — okay. Right. Well.”

Dream is starting to think he massively miscalculated by asking Wilbur. He should have asked Phil, or Ant. They’re both in *actual* relationships. Not like the rest of his friends, despite their best wishes and the name of their group chat.

“I don’t know man,” Wilbur says. “Do stuff for him. Say nice things. *Don’t* write songs about how he ripped out your heart and tore it to shreds.”

“...Right.”

“And *especially* don’t post those songs on the internet for the whole world to see,” Wilbur adds thoughtfully, nodding. “Or say that their city gave you cancer.”

“...Great talk, Wilbur,” Dream says. “Thanks.”

Getting over George was never going to be possible, Dream realises. Even when he’s not at the coffee shop being a nuisance, George lives in his mind rent free.

Dream never really noticed it before, but he and George text a *lot*.

Half Dream’s camera roll are pictures are George, selfies and screen shots and real-life pictures when he’s done something dumb. The other half is filled with memes George sent him or pics of them with their other friends.

Then there’s the messages themselves, which teeter between calling each other idiots and bickering about nothing, to genuine conversation about assignments and deadlines. Then, occasionally, but too often for it to not be a *thing*, texts that could pass as flirting that have Dream calling up Sapnap at 2am.

(“He said, ‘you’re cute when you’re mad’ Sapnap, what do you think it *means*?”

“Oh my god.”)

Dream knows he should probably, like, *not*, but George is his own person. If he didn’t want to text him back he wouldn’t and it’s not like they’re doing anything *wrong*. It’s not like Dream’s sexting him, or anything.

(*Sexting George*, he thinks. What would that be like? Would he be bratty, like he is sometimes when he wants his own way, or pouty and pliable and do whatever— *No*.)

Anyway, it’s just two friends texting, there’s nothing more to it. Friends send each other flirty texts all the time.

Then George will send him a completely innocent thirst trap like a photo of him drinking boba tea through a straw and Dream will just need to go and. Lie down.

It also doesn’t help that Sapnap’s words are stuck in his head, that Cliff is a discount version of him, and that everything George likes about Cliff he also likes about Dream.

He thinks it would be easier if he thought he had no chance, if he could just focus on giving up on George and walking away. Instead he sees George will Cliff sometimes and thinks *I could be so*

much better. I am so much better. Just give me a chance.

Then there are the times when Cliff isn't there, and Dream thinks maybe, just maybe...

Like today.

He and George are alone at George's table in the coffee shop. Dream is, for once, not on shift and George is, as he is increasingly these days, not on a date with Cliff.

Dream stretched his long legs out under the table a while ago, and accidentally nudged George's foot with his own. George had looked up at him then, very deliberately, caught Dream's foot between his own and kept it there. Dream hasn't moved since.

It's nearing Christmas and they're discussing plans for the new year. Somehow the three of them - Dream, George and Sapnap - have ended up with no plans to return home, leaving them free to spend the holiday season together.

The only problem is, George refuses to commit to anything, Sapnap's useless with any sort of organisation, and Dream's only stipulation is that it's the three of them. All other traditions he could really care less about.

"*Dream*," George whines. "What do you *want*?"

"Whatever you want," Dream replies automatically, scrolling through his phone.

"Ugh." George looks close to throttling him. "*Dream*."

"Ask Sapnap." He can *feel* himself starting to smile. "It's gonna be the three of us together anyway."

"He's with *Karl*," George pulls a face.

"Hey," says Dream, "Of the three of us, you're the only one with an actual—" he refuses to say the word boyfriend, "*—thing* who you can go off and make out with whenever you want."

As if knowing that they're speaking about him, George's phone vibrates on the table between them. George glances down at his phone screen but doesn't move to pick it up.

"Or not...?" Dream asks.

George swipes away the message from Cliff and continues as if Dream never spoke, "If we're going to do this, I just want it to matter, okay?" He's got that stubborn edge to his jaw he gets sometimes when he really wants something. "I want it to be good."

"George." Dream's hands itch to reach across the table and grab George's, to lace their fingers together and brush his thumbs over his knuckles to reassure him. Instead, Dream places his hands under the table on his own lap instead. "It's gonna be great. How could it not be? It's us."

George looks at him for a long time, wariness in his gaze, but there's hope there too. Like he's trying desperately not to get excited about them all spending time together, which is stupid. They've been talking about this for *months*.

"George." Dream lowers his voice. "What's up?"

George takes a breath. He's looking everywhere but at Dream. "It's just... I've been thinking."

“Don’t hurt yourself.”

“Shut *up*.” George glares at him. “Idiot.” He leans back in his seat and crosses his arms. “I’ve been *thinking* about us.”

Us, Dream’s voice screams. Somehow, he manages to keep his face neutral as he replies, “Oh?”

“Yeah,” George says. “Do you think it’s a bad thing to want to spend time with your friends?”

“Uh, no.” What a stupid question. Dream stares at him as he tries to still his racing heart.

“Ugh, that’s not what I meant,” George says, “I meant—” He cuts himself off and runs a hand through his hair, tugging at the strands. “I mean, if you’re dating someone. Shouldn’t you want to spend time with them?”

Are they talking about Cliff? They’re talking about Cliff. Dream is not qualified to talk about this, oh God.

“I mean — of course you should. But like, more than your friends? Instead of your friends? Is that normal? Should I—” George is rambling. George is *rambling* and Dream can’t take his eyes off him. “I just— argh.” George puts his hands over his face, groaning into them.

Dream wants to reach over and take hold of his hands, wants to pull them away from his face and tell him to stop worrying. Instead, he clasps his own hands together tighter under the table on his lap, so hard it starts to hurt a little.

“I mean, I’m no expert,” says Dream, “But isn’t the person you’re dating supposed to be your best friend anyway?”

George lowers his hands, looking at him.

“Just what I’ve heard,” says Dream. “But what would I know? My best friend is dating someone else.”

He says it without thinking, his mouth moving ahead of his brain. As the words register, he panics and his mouth goes into overdrive. “I mean — not like — I was just — you—”

“Dream,” says George. “Breathe.”

Dream shuts his mouth with a click of his teeth, forces himself to stop talking. He unclasps his hands under the table and reaches for his mug.

“You’re my best friend too,” George says.

Dream nearly knocks over his drink. *Fuck*.

“Dream?”

“I’m fine!” Dream lies, trying to hide his shaking hands by wrapping them around his mug and holding tight. “Totally fine. Look, is this about Christmas? Does Clifford—” *fuck* “—Cliff want you to spend it with him?”

George doesn’t reply, but he doesn’t have to. His silence says it all.

“Because that’s totally fine... if it’s what you want.” He thinks about all the time they’ve spent together recently. The missed calls from Cliff and ignored texts. The way George never leaves

Dream on read.

Dream's chest starts to feel a little tight.

"What if..." George pauses, "What if that's not what I want?"

This *hurts*. Dream always thought hope was a soft thing, something warm. When it comes to George, hope is a sharp sliver of ice in his veins, catching in his chest and making it hard to breathe.

"Then you need to decide what you want," Dream says. "And go for it. A real friend, best friend, whatever, won't hold it against you."

George is silent for a moment. "And you?" he asks. "Do you go for what you want?"

I want you. The words are on the tip of Dream's tongue. He can feel the shape of them, knows what they taste like. To say them out loud now would change things forever. Dream knows exactly what he wants, he just doesn't think he can have it.

His throat feels dry, it's scratchy when he breathes in. "Lets — can we talk about something else? Please?"

George looks at him strangely. For a moment, Dream genuinely thinks he's going to call him on it, that George is going to press him to find out why he's being so strange about this, but then George leans back in his chair and says, "So, tell me about your assignment."

The air feels heavy between them. There's the faintest of flushes to George's cheeks. Dream doesn't call him on it.

Just like he doesn't call George on it later that night when he gets another call from Cliff and puts his phone on silent; or when George's arm brushes his as they walk home together; or when George lets Dream walk him all the way home to the steps to his building and looks up at him with a gentle smile and says, "Goodnight Dream."

"I'm so fucking in love with him, Sappnap," Dream says, on the phone with Sappnap later that night.

"I know."

"Like, I literally cannot imagine the rest of my life without him."

"I *know*."

Dream sighs into the phone and rolls over on his mattress to press his face into his pillow. He's having an alarming number of phone calls with Sappnap from his bed, these days.

After a while, Sappnap sighs. "Dude, I know you don't want to, but I really think you should tell him. This is — I've never seen you like this, man."

Dream hums his agreement. He's never felt like this before either.

"*Talk* to him," Sappnap repeats. "Tell him the truth."

"And if he rejects me? What if I'm not what he wants?"

“Then you’re not what he wants.” Sapnap is brutal in his honesty. “But you’ll never know unless you try.”

Dream thinks about George opposite him in the cafe, smiling and laughing and making plans for their Christmas together. Every time he’d caught George looking and every time George had caught him. The slivers of hope that had risen in Dream’s chest and pierced his heart.

“What’s so bad about telling someone you love them, anyway?” Sapnap asks. “Everyone deserves to know they’re loved.” His tone turns gentle. “Even if – Even *if* George doesn’t feel the same – and why wouldn’t he? You’re awesome – he’s still your best friend. He’s never gonna stop being that.”

He’s... got a point. Knowing Sapnap’s backed him into a corner, Dream picks up his phone from where he’d thrown it on the mattress earlier in their conversation and glares at it, even though they’re not on Facetime.

“Dream...? You still there, man?”

“Yes,” Dream mutters, still glaring. Then, under his breath: “You’re right.”

“I’m sorry, what was that?” The glee in Sapnap’s voice is palpable.

“I said you’re right,” Dream repeats, louder.

Sapnap cheers on the other end of the phone. “I *told* you. Like, I love you, man, but you’re *such* an overthinker. You over analyse everything. Sometimes you just gotta be impulsive, shoot your shot. Pun intended.”

Dream groans into his pillow again, but for an entirely different reason this time. “I hate you.” His words are muffled but he knows Sapnap hears them, his laughter loud down the phone.

Dream can feel himself going red, embarrassed and flustered in equal measure. “Fuck off.”

Sapnap just laughs harder.

The next day, just before closing, George turns up at the coffee shop.

He comes in through the door almost hesitantly and there’s a nervousness to his movements Dream isn’t used to. When he sees Dream by the counter he smiles, but it’s almost nervous. Dream’s heart, upon seeing him, goes stupidly *fond*.

“Hey, stranger,” he says.

George’s lips quirk.

It’s been too long, Dream thinks, since they last shared cake. It used to be such a nightly ritual – fuck, how was he so *oblivious* – and then it became weekly and now, ever since Cliff, it barely happens at all.

George approaches the counter.

“Sapnap called me,” he says. “He said you had something to tell me.”

“Sapnap’s a liar,” Dream says, “He lies about everything ever.”

“Oh,” says George.

“It’s nothing,” Dream lies. “Promise.”

George does not look at all like he believes him, but he doesn’t call Dream on it. Instead, he glances over the display case with the cake next to him. It’s been cleaned out already for the evening, no pieces left on show.

He doesn’t think he imagines the slight deflation to George’s shoulders. Dream’s heart hammers in his chest.

He crouches and picks up a plate from one of the lower shelves, places it on the counter between them to reveal a slice of cake.

George’s gaze flickers down to it. “You...”

“I always keep one aside,” Dream says, “Just in case.”

“Oh.”

Dream turns to get two forks from the back and when he turns back around George is watching him with an expression Dream can’t quite parse. “What?” Dream asks, putting the forks down.

“Nothing,” George says.

George takes the plate and the forks over to his usual table. Dream finishes cleaning down the counter and then heads over to join him. The closer he gets to the table, the more nervous he feels, even though he tells himself that it’s stupid. They’re just friends. Two friends, sharing cake. Alone in a coffee shop after dark.

—With one utterly in love with the other and about to confess all his feelings.

Oh God.

Dream sits down. George’s foot bumps against his under the table.

They eat in silence for the first few minutes, just content to be together. It feels... normal. Natural. Like they’ve always been. They spend the rest of the evening as they always do, chatting back and forth. George tells him about his latest assignment, Dream has to bite his tongue to stop himself from offering to do it for him. George’s hair falls across his face, almost in his eyes, Dream presses his hands between his thighs under the table to stop himself from reaching out and pushing it back for him. George leaves his phone on the table, face down, the entire night and doesn’t once check to see if he’s got a message.

The night stretches on, later than it used to when they shared cake together. Outside the shop the sky is vast and black and endless, silvery-white stars shining down. The world slows down around them, traffic disappearing, people returning to their homes, until it almost feels as if they’re the only two people still awake.

It’s on the tip of his tongue, Dream’s ready to say it - he *is* - but there doesn’t seem to be the right moment, no perfect lull in the conversation or moment when George’s words lead him to it.

Then they’re leaving and pulling on their coats and Dream wraps his scarf around his neck with fingers that feel slow and clumsy.

Outside the coffee shop, George lingers. He pushes his hands in his pockets and looks up at Dream, head tilted just slightly back. Dream thinks of that night after the party, George looking up at him under the stars. *I really like you.*

What if he'd known then? What if he'd taken his chance then?

Would they still be here?

He'd missed his chance already once. He wasn't going to lose it again.

"George?"

"Yeah?"

"I love you," he says.

George takes in a sharp breath. "Oh my god."

"I just wanted you to know. I know you're seeing Cliff, and that's fine, but you're fucking amazing, George, and I can't hold it back anymore."

It really is a relief, telling George, admitting to what he feels. Sapnap was right, even if nothing changes, even if George and Cliff get married and have kids and get a house with a little white picket fence and all that. It doesn't matter. George deserves to be loved, deserves to *know* that he's loved.

"You're my best friend," Dream says, because the floodgates are open now and he's already ripped out his heart so might as well offer it on a platter to George. "Probably the best thing that's ever happened to me, honestly. I love you. Even when you're bratty and grumpy and doing your best just to rile everyone up; when you're lazy and you skip class and I let you borrow my notes; or you come to the shop after everything's closed up and steal the last piece of cake, I don't care, because I love you. I'm *in* love with you. I think I always have been."

George is staring at him, eyes wide.

"You don't have to reply," Dream says, "I'm not expecting anything. I just wanted you to know. You're great, George. I love you."

For a moment, it feels as if the whole world is silent. A collective inhale, a stolen breath. Dream closes his eyes for the briefest of moments, lets the feeling of being completely open and honest settle over him.

He told George, and the world didn't end.

"Dream," says George, "I broke things off with Cliff."

Dream's eyes snap open. "What?"

"I broke things off with Cliff," George repeats. It makes even less sense the second time around.

"You — what?"

"I'm not saying it again. You heard me." George smiles. George is smiling. Why is George smiling? "Turns out he wasn't what I was looking for. Bit of a cheap copy, really. A discount version, some would say."

“Have you been talking to *Techno*?” Dream demands.

“What?” asks George, thrown, “Of course not, I — did you hear me? I broke up with Cliff, Dream.”

“Yeah,” says Dream. “Yeah... What?”

George sighs out a long, pained breath. “You’re such an idiot.”

George reaches out, curling his hands in the front of Dream’s coat, and yanks him forwards. Dream stumbles, hands flailing, and rests them on George’s shoulders to keep his balance. *Perfect height*, an old voice says in his mind, smug and satisfied.

Dream tilts his head down. George tilts his up.

“I’m in love with you too,” says George — and kisses him.

As far as first kisses go, it’s not amazing, or mind-blowing or life-changing. It’s just George and him on a cold winter’s night, sharing the same air and feeling each other’s hearts beating against their chest. It’s the feeling of finally being in the place he should be with the person he should be with.

If anything, it just feels like kissing his best friend.

Dream breaks the kiss, heart clenching in his chest. “Holy shit.”

George leans up, tugging Dream down so he can kiss him again. Dream can feel him smile into it. *Holy shit*.

Dream gets lost in the kiss this time, slides his hands down George’s arms from his shoulders then around to the small of his back so he can tug him in closer. When he does, their whole of their bodies press together and George’s breath hitches.

One of George’s hands snakes up, around the back of Dream’s neck and he sinks his fingers into his hair. George tugs on the strands as he pulls him closer and the move sends a shock straight down Dream’s spine, all the way to his fucking *toes*, because apparently that’s something Dream is into, who knew?

“You’re a menace,” he says to George, teeth dragging over his bottom lip.

George tilts his head back, looks him straight in the eyes.

“You love me,” George says, utterly sure, utterly confident.

Dream can’t even deny it. “Yeah,” he says, “I do.”

They kiss until Dream’s chest starts to ache, until his lips are sore and the tip of his nose is numb from the cold, until he can’t feel his fingers and the only thought in his head is *George*. It could be minutes, it could be hours, it could be days.

When they finally break for air, George shifts his grip, one hand still caught in Dream’s hair, and brings the other hand up from his chest, across his throat then up, to trace the line of Dream’s jaw. Now they’ve started touching, he doesn’t seem to want to stop. “I can’t believe you tried setting me up with different people,” he says, then adds softly, “Idiot.”

“Fuck off,” replies Dream, turning his head so he can kiss the palm of George’s hand. “I can’t

believe you tried dating other people when you've been in love with me this whole time."

George's cheeks are pink. Dream knows it's not from the cold. "Our friends are never going to let us live this down."

"Fuck them," replies Dream. "Or maybe... fuck you?"

George stares at him. "Was that a line? It *was*." He brings both hands down to press at Dream's chest, attempting to push him away. Dream holds him close by the waist. "That was *awful*, Dream."

"You love me."

"Yeah," says George, no shame in it whatsoever. "Yeah, I do."

Dream grins and kisses him again, and again, and again.

He doesn't think he'll ever stop.

Chapter End Notes

Lets give it up for Sapnap, the true mvp of oblivious!dnf fic

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